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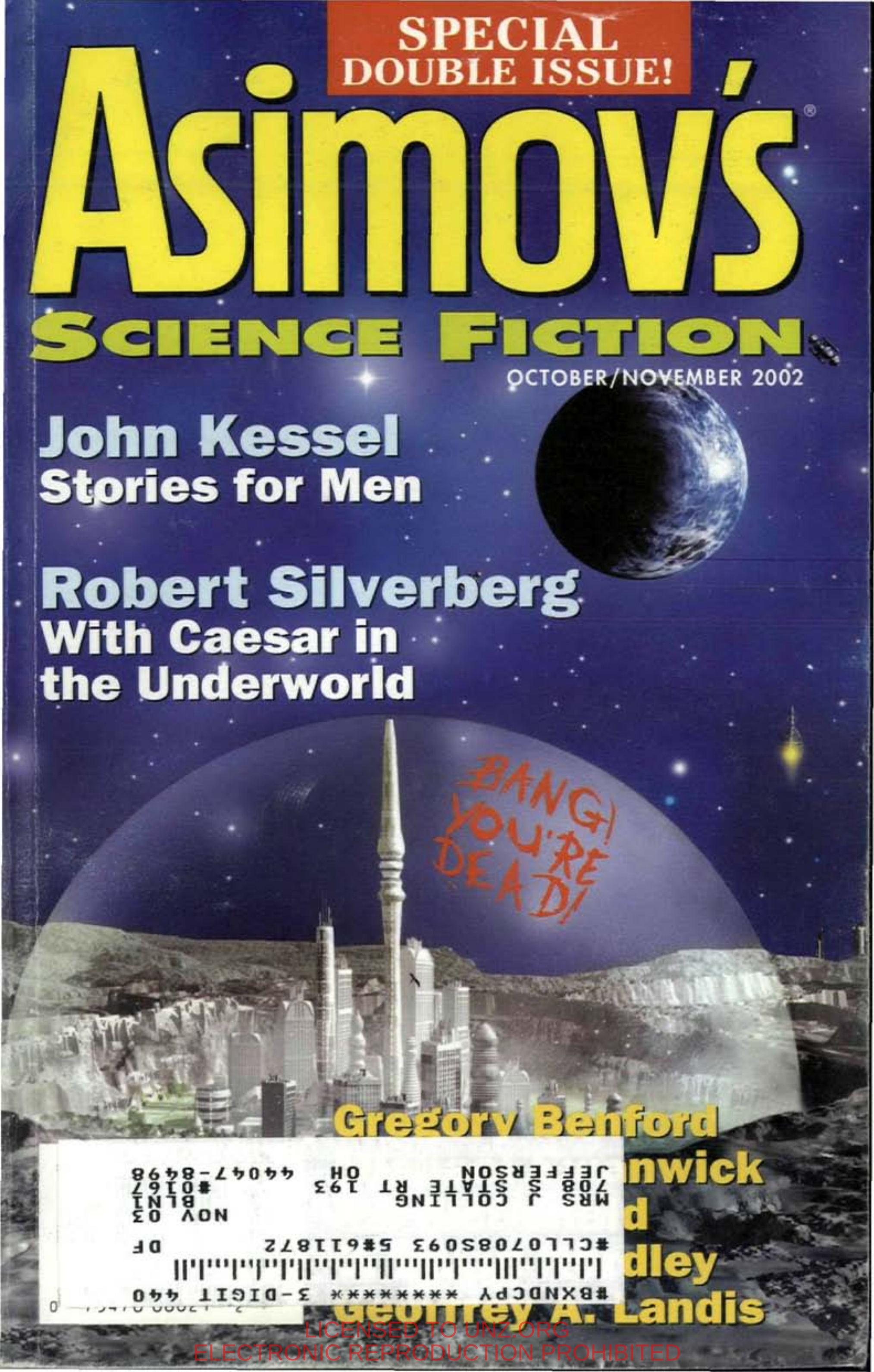

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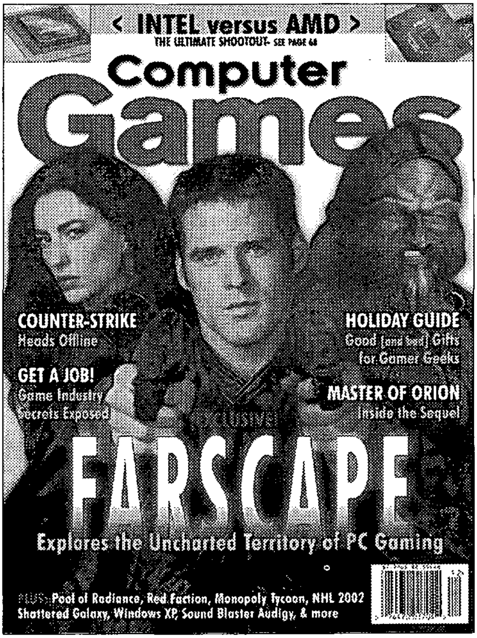
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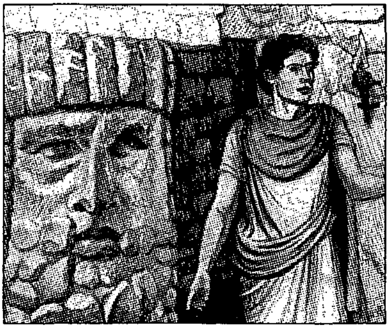
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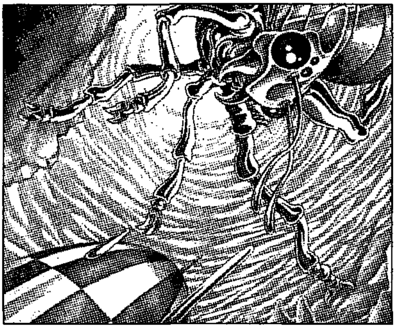
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Science Fiction

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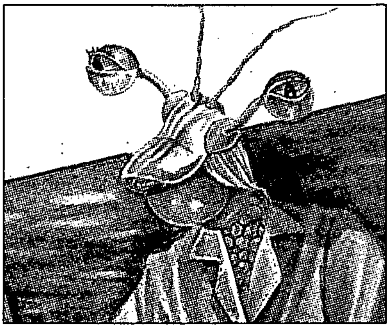

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EDITORIAL

by Gardner Dozois

A MISSPENT LIFE?

I've only ever had one talent, only one thing I was really good at doing, and everything else has come from that. That talent is reading. Knowing how to read. Reading easily and well. *Enjoying* reading. That's the foundation for everything else I've managed to accomplish in my life.

I can thank my mother for the ability to read, for she taught me how to read when I was very young, long before I entered kindergarten. She was a lifelong insomniac, a tendency that I share, and throughout the long nights when my father wasn't around, which was the majority of the time, we'd sit up together for hours, throughout the night until the sun started to peek in through the windows, and we'd share crackers and pickles together and she would read aloud to me, read aloud to me for hours, teaching me how to sound out the words. The books that she'd read to me from most often—and I never saw how peculiar this was until much later—were collections of Walt Kelly's *Pogo* comic strips. Most of the political satire in those *Pogo* strips went over my head, of course, and went over my mother's head as well, truth be told, as she was not a highly educated woman, but the humor came through, and the relish that Kelly took in playing with words. Since my mother spoke with an extremely broad working-class New England accent, listening to her faithfully trying to reproduce the comic Deep South dialect in which the *Pogo* books are written must have been enough to make a cat laugh, although, of course, my own untrained ear couldn't hear it at the time. If any time-travelers are headed back that way, I'd dearly love a tape.

I do believe that if my mother hadn't taught me to read, and to love reading, at such an early age, that none of you would ever have heard of me.

I even remember the very first word that I ever read all by myself, a moment that, silly as it is, was one of the major epiphanies of my life. If you held a gun to my head, I couldn't tell you what I had been doing five minutes before that epiphany, or five minutes later, but the minute or two of the epiphany itself, I remember in every vivid detail, as if it had happened only a second ago, as if it's *still* happening somewhere, in some parallel dimension. I was sitting by myself in the living room of our third-floor apartment, sitting on the floor next to the bay window, looking through the comic strips in the Sunday paper, just looking at the brightly colored pictures, because as yet I couldn't read. I can remember the leaves of the trees shaking outside the window, and the way that sunlight was slanting in through the window, and the way that dust motes were hanging suspended in the sunlight. And I remember the way the dialogue balloons looked that rose above the mouths of the characters, filled with incomprehensible scribbles, alien hieroglyphics. And then, looking closer, at a strip that, in retrospect, I realize must have been *Blondie & Dagwood,* I suddenly realized that two of the scribbles coming out of Blondie's mouth were an "N" and an "O," and this must have come together in the back of my head with some lesson that my mother had been teaching me, because it suddenly struck me that "N" and "O" together made up the word "no," and that Blondie was *saying* "No." That the symbols in the balloons were not just meaningless scribbles, that they were conveying a message to me, a message that I could read and understand. This revelation hit me with blinding force, like a bolt of lightning. I doubt that Saint Paul's revelation on the road to Damascus could have been any more intense or overwhelming. I threw the newspaper up in the air and tore madly around the room, capering like a lunatic, ecstatically shouting "n-o means NO! N-o means NO!" And then I froze, for all at once it hit me, again with overwhelming force, that all the *other* such scribbles in the world, scribbles and hieroglyphics *everywhere*, on bottles, on labels, on street-signs, in the newspapers, on TV, on the front of the stove and the refrigerator, scribbles everywhere that I had been ignoring up until now, looking at without really *seeing* them or paying any real attention to them, all around me, *all* of them had hidden meanings, all of them were trying to *tell* me something, all of them had something to say to me, secret wisdom to convey, if only I could learn to *read* them. And I was struck with an overwhelming desire, flooding in on me, to understand them all, every single one of them.

To such an extent that, to this very day, if you put a ketchup bottle down in front of me, I have no choice but to read the label, reflexively, compulsively, unstoppably. I can't *not* read it. Who *knows* what secret wisdom that ketchup bottle label could be trying to convey to me, after all?

I was a lonely child who led an isolated existence, with few, if any

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friends, or even other children around, most of my time spent either with just my mother for company or all by myself (in retrospect, I seem to have spent centuries, if not whole geologic eras, wandering around my small New England town all by myself, from when I was very little—something my doting but absent-minded mother allowed that would never be allowed today). And so reading remained very important to me, a central part of my life, and as soon as I *could* read by myself, which was at a very young age (my mother claimed that I could read independently by the time I was two years old—she was an unreliable witness in many ways, so who knows if this is true, but it was at least very early on, certainly years before I entered the school system), I devoured any book (indeed, any piece of paper with writing on it) that I could get my hands on. In many ways, books and stories were my only real friends, something that remained true throughout large stretches of my entire life. I remember one bitterly cold winter night when I was a teenage soldier in Germany, away from home for the first time, freshly assigned overseas, knowing nobody except fellow soldiers I'd only been introduced to a day before, as lonely and depressed and forlorn as I'd ever been in my life, wandering into the tiny base library and seeing on the shelves there familiar books that I'd once taken out of the library at home, and feeling a sudden surge of warmth and encouragement as I touched the familiar cracked, threadbare spines of the books and looked at their faded covers. It was all right. I could get through this. I wasn't alone here after all. I had *friends*.

Most of those friends, from a fairly early age, had been science fiction. I felt drawn to the genre immediately, an attraction that strengthened as the years went by and my reading sophistication increased. Thinking about it in retrospect, and from talking to other people about their own early reading habits, I think I've come to see why.

An early favorite book of mine was Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, and I moved from there into reading other young adult series about animals, including Jim Kjelgaard's series about Irish Setters, Walter Farley's two series of horse books, and Albert Payston Terhune's long and (in hindsight) intolerably mawkish series about heroic collie dogs. At the same time, I was reading the "boy's adventure" series of the day, like Rick Brant's Scientific Adventures, Tom Swift, Jr., and the Hardy Boys, although even at the time, I thought those were rather lame (didn't stop me from reading them, though!). At some point, I gradually moved out of reading these other things into reading science fiction. I think that the first SF books I read that I can really remember well, ones that made an impression on me deeper than did those I might have run across before that, were the so-called "juvenile" novels of Andre Norton, which I ran into in the school library. I quickly went from there to reading the Heinlein juveniles, though, which made an even *stronger* impression on me—it was probably the Heinlein juveniles that first set the hook in, which seemed to satisfy whatever hunger I was trying to assuage with these other books better than they did.

A little bit after that, once I'd been reading the Heinlein juveniles for awhile, I discovered science fiction *magazines*, and that's when I really got hooked. My first magazine was *Fantastic*, which at that point was being edited by Cele Goldsmith. She'd just coaxed Fritz Leiber back out of semi-retirement, and the magazine was running all these great

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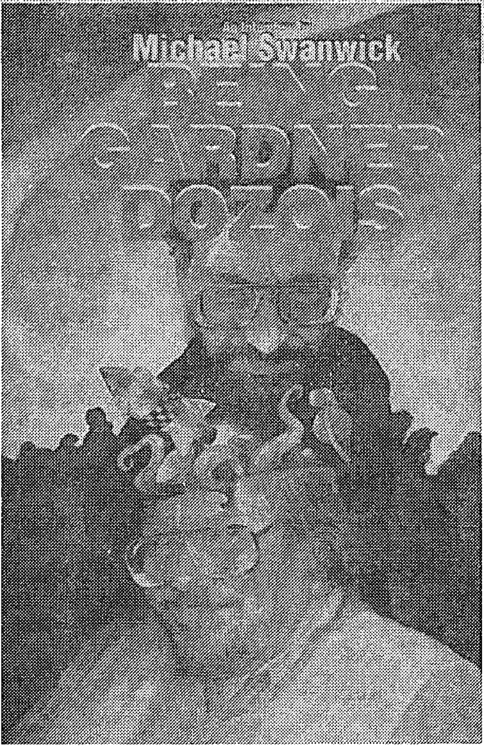

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Gray Mouser stories by him, and that instantly hooked me. At about the same time, I ran into anthologies such as *Unknown*, by Don Benson, and *Sword & Sorcery* by L. Sprague de Camp, which also had similar stuff in them, including other Gray Mouser stories, Howard's Conan stories, Manly Wade Wellman's Silver John stories. Benson, as the editor of Pyramid, was also bringing back classic fantasy novels, such as De Camp and Pratt's *The Incomplete Enchanter*. So in a way, except for Heinlein and Norton, I was actually a fantasy fan before I was an SF fan.

Later, after a brief infatuation with Edgar Rice Burroughs, H. Rider Haggard, and A. Merritt, stories by writers like Roger Zelazny, Poul Anderson and Jack Vance, many of them also in *Fantastic* and her sister magazine, *Amazing*, along with Heinlein, of course, started to shift me away from sword & sorcery to SF, and I started reading everything I could find.

Hal Clement's *Cycle of Fire* and *Mission of Gravity* were early favorites of mine, as were Poul Anderson's "Dominic Flandry" and "Time Patrol" stories, Keith Laumer's *Worlds of the Imperium* and *A Plague of Demons*, De Camp's *Lest Darkness Fall* and *The Hand of Zei*, Jack Vance's *The Star King* and *The Blue World*, Brian Aldiss's *The Long Afternoon of Earth*, Edgar Pangborn's *Davy*. I remember being impressed early on by Alfred Bester, particularly *The Stars My Destination*, still one of the great SF novels. A little later, when I was making my first halting attempts to write my own stuff, I encountered the short fiction of Cordwainer Smith, and had my blinkered little mind blown completely out of the back of my skull. I was also an early Samuel R. Delany fan, and read all his novels before anyone else had heard of him or was paying any attention to him. The same thing with Ursula K. Le Guin.

I think I can see a common thread tying all of this stuff together.

I was a working-class kid in a small working-class New England mill town, and my father worked in a chemical factory in the even bleaker and more Dickensian factory town next door. We weren't as poor as people in hardcore urban slums, I suppose, but we were poor enough for all practical purposes. And this was the fifties, the grayest, bleakest, most blinkered and culturally repressive period in the entire second half of the twentieth century, especially in small-town America.

In retrospect, I think that what I was looking for most was the view from someone else's eyes (or some *thing* else's eyes), someone who was leading a totally different kind of life than the rather gray, miserable, and downtrodden existence I was actually leading myself, anywhere but where I actually *was*. To get inside someone else's skin. The yearning for color and exoticism to contrast with the gray world I actually lived in was a big factor here—and in fact, to this day, I still respond well to SF or fantasy that has lots of "local color" and exoticism in it. In some ways, I respond to the same sort of thing in historical fiction that I do in SF, which is probably why it's always been easy to sell me something that has lots of strong historical details of exotic cultures in it or that takes place in some other time period.

Yes, we're talking about the much sneered at Sense of Wonder here—still, to my mind, the major reason to read science fiction or fantasy in the first place. To be taken somewhere else, to briefly *become* someone else, and, for the span of time it takes you to turn the pages, to live a life that you otherwise could never have known. As editor of *Asimov's*, I've always tried to keep firmly in mind

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the fact that I have the same job as P.T. Barnum: it's my job to show people miracles and wonders, for money. No miracles, no wonders—no customers, either. I think that this core fact is something that we forget to our peril.

And so, step by step, without really intending to early on, I ended up devoting my life to a career in science fiction.

And thus changed my life forever. A life that had been planned out for me by everybody around me, and that without the liberating force of science fiction, without the eye-opening sense of different perspectives and possibilities it bestowed, would have been different in every respect, and probably much inferior in most of them as well. Before I even graduated from high school, my father had already arranged for me to get a job at the factory in which he worked, a job that he remained disappointed I didn't take until the day he died, my accomplishments in the world of fiction meaning less than nothing to him. Without science fiction to dissatisfy me with the world in which I lived, to make me long for something different and better, and to make me believe that it was *possible* to reach a different kind of life, that a different kind of life even *existed*, the chances are very good that I would have spent the rest of my life in that small New England town, as almost everyone else I grew up with did, working in the factory or in some other blue collar job. Science fiction was my way out of that small town, as it has been the way out for thousands of other people across the span of the last century, from Jack Williamson to Howard Waldrop, and it was the only way out, other than picking up a gun and turning to a life of crime, or finding in myself an unlikely talent for becoming a rock and roll star. As a working-class boy of the time, the ironclad barriers of class were closed against my finding my way into any other area of art or literature, with all of my teachers, and my advisors, and even the ad-missions officers at the colleges themselves discouraging me from applying for college, telling me that "college isn't for you" or "your sort don't go to college." The bastions of High Art seemed similarly out of reach; "serious music," painting, sculpting, opera, the ballet, poetry, literature—those things were for rich people, not for kids from my side of the tracks. But because science fiction was a proletarian art, created by ordinary people with no particular training or certification, because it was an art form that the literary/artistic establishment didn't care about, and so didn't rigorously police, it offered a chink in the defenses of an otherwise seemingly impregnable citadel—a crack that I squeezed myself through to escape the dreary life that everyone assumed I'd have no choice but to lead. Without science fiction, you would never have heard of me, and somebody else would have their name listed as editor on the masthead of this magazine.

There's been a lot of talk in the last couple of years about how the genre is on its last legs, but, to modify the words of Mark Twain, I think that the Death of Science Fiction has been greatly exaggerated. In some ways, the science fiction genre has never been in better shape, either commercially or artistically.

But perhaps most importantly, science fiction or something resembling it and descended from it is not going to die because it will always be *needed*. There'll always be a need for wonder, there'll always be people who long for a different kind of life, for the view from other sorts of eyes, for a chance to see what's over the hill, or off in another world.

So, then, all those years ago, against all the odds, I took the thinnest of all possible thin chances, and devoted myself to a life in science fiction. And because of that decision, not only have I been able to have a life in the arts and a life of the mind of a sort that would have almost certainly been otherwise impossible for someone of my social class and inferior education any other way, but I actually got to meet and associate with some of the people whose accomplishments I admired the most, people such as Fritz Leiber and Roger Zelazny and Isaac Asimov and John Brunner and Clifford Simak and Alfred Bester and Damon Knight and Robert Silverberg. And in addition to the paper friends of books, I got to make some lifelong flesh-and-blood friends whom I otherwise would certainly never have gotten the chance to meet, people such as Susan Casper, and Jack Dann, and George R.R. Martin, and Pat Cadigan, and Joe and Jay Haldeman, and Michael Swanwick, and Eileen Gunn, and Howard Waldrop, and dozens of others.

I've probably had to read more bad science fiction than anyone else in the world; but, on the other hand, I've probably been privileged to read more *good* science fiction than anyone else in the world.

People sometimes ask me if I regret having wasted my life working in science fiction, and not doing something of *real* importance and significance instead, but, on the whole, it seems to me that it's not really been such a bad bargain at all. Certainly I could have done much worse—and the odds are good that I probably *would* have done much worse, taking any other path.

So, no—I don't regret it. Other people may be richer than science fiction people, or more important, or more famous, or more beautiful, or more glamorous, or more successful.

But we have the best dreams. ○

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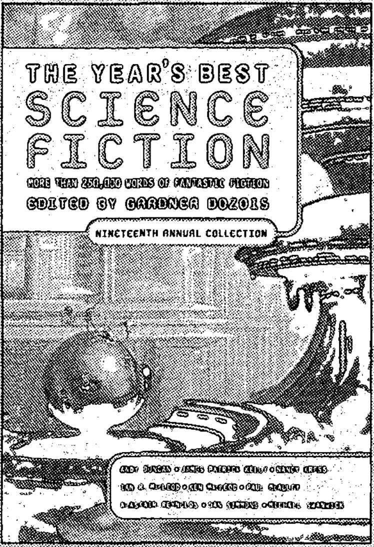
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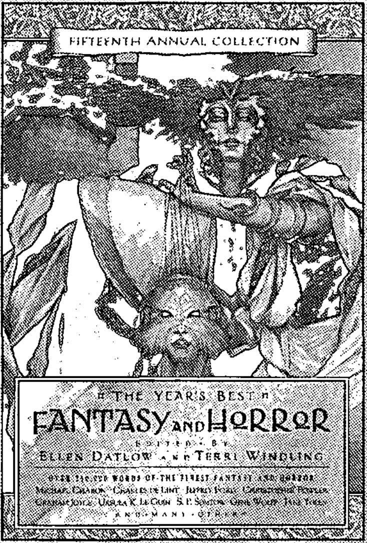
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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

HE QUALITY OF PITY IS NOT FOLDED

owe this one to Jim Caughran of Willowdale, Ontario. He is the publisher of a small-press magazine (a "fanzine") called *A Propos e Rien* that is distributed through e Fantasy Amateur Press Associa- on, a fanzine group to which I've elonged for many years. In issue 57 of *A Propos de Rien* he speaks of n Internet site that makes hilari- us use of the Babelfish computer rogram to translate phrases in and ut of five different languages, with emarkably chaotic results.

Computer translation programs, n the current state of the art, are easonably good at equating one nguage with another. But they ave understandable trouble with lang and local idioms, and the dif- erences in basic grammatical struc- ure between languages cause other ifficulties, all of which become cu- ulative if you run a series of trans- tions of the same sentence.

The sentence Jim Caughran chose use is an old catchphrase of sci- nce fiction fans: "Fandom is just a oddamn hobby." The translation rogram turned it first into French: *Fandom est juste un sacre passe- mps.*

Which became, moving back to nglish: *Fandom right one is crowned astime.*

And on to German: *Recht man andom ist gekroenter Pastime.*

English: *Quite one fan cathedral crowned Pastime.*

Into Italian: *Abbastanza una cat- drale del ventilatore e pastime owned.*

This, in Portuguese: *Bastante uma catedral do ventilador e pastime coroado.*

Back to English: *Sufficiently a cathedral of the fan is pastime crowned.*

Then Spanish: *Una catedral del ventilador es suficientemente pasatiempo coronado.*

Which gives us, finally, this triumphant statement: *A cathedral of the ventilator is sufficiently crowned pastime.*

How did this happen? Why did the translation program foul things up so badly? Let's go over it step by step.

Right at the beginning, the French translation, unable to handle an American idiom, desperately gives us *sacre* for "goddamn." It must have taken the "god" part of that word as permission to translate "goddamn" as "sacred" or "holy." But *sacre,* unfortunately, also is a French noun meaning "anointing" or "coronation," and when the phrase came back into English, it was that latter meaning that the computer picked—giving us "crowned pastime" in place of "goddamn hobby."

The next problem crops up in the German. The computer, struggling with "fandom," sees *dom,* which is German for "cathedral," and makes "fan cathedral" out of the word on the next bounce into English. Now it is the turn of Italian to translate "fan" not as *amatore,* which is the actual Italian equivalent of "fan" in the sense of a hobbyist, but as *ventilatore,* which is a different kind of fan entirely. Meanwhile the English

French and things get worse from there.

Science fiction writers, as you know, are in the habit of equipping their spacefaring heroes with translating devices that swiftly and accurately render unfamiliar alien languages into lucid English. We have always suspected that creating such a device would be, of course, easier said than done. In Kim Stanley Robinson's 1990 story "The Translator," which pokes lethal fun at the concept of a translating machine, a hapless Earthman meeting with two alien species at once has one group tell him things like "*Warlike viciously now descendant fat food flame death*" while the other comes through the translating gizmo with sounds that can be translated, the machine says, as *"1. Fish market. 2. Fish harvest. 3. Sunspots visible from a depth of 10 meters below the surface of the ocean on a calm day. 4. Traditional festival. 5. Astrological configuration in galactic core."*

That's science fiction. But here in the mundane world we now have an actual translating program, capable of garbling things just as effectively using only Terrestrial languages, and using it in the extreme manner (to be fair, it never really was designed to translate the same sentence in and out of five languages other than English) shows us how tough the translating job really is. You probably want to know the address of the program so you can produce your own linguistic spaghetti and here, before we proceed, it is: <*www.tashian.com/multibabel*>

One of its wonders is that it won't necessarily give you the same garble twice. When I ran "Fandom is just a goddamn hobby" through a second time it chose not to translate "goddamn" into French at all, merely carrying it through as an untranslatable English idiom—thus giving me, on the final bounce, *The cathedral of the ventilator is of the pastime of right one of goddamn.* Then, to avoid the "goddamn" problem entirely, I used "accursed" instead, and that turned into the correct French word, *maudit*. But for some reason that word got only a one-way translation and came back to me in English unchanged, which led eventually to *The cathedral of the ventilator is expert of Pastimemaudit.*

Then I tried Nathan Hale's famous last words, which I misremembered as "I regret that I have but one life to lose for my country." By the time this had passed through German and Spanish it had become *I unfortunaty (sic) regard it that I have however one life span to destroy for my country,* and sending it on to Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish morphed it into *Unfortunaty is concerned what I nevertheless lasts of distrugg for my country.*

But upon checking I discovered that what Nathan Hale actually said was, "I *only* regret that I have but one life to lose for my country," and the insertion of that small adverb created vast changes in the outcome. "I regret" became, passing through Italian, not "unfortunaty" this time, but "me sorrow," and "only" came back as "solo." "Me sorrow" then turned into the Spanish *yo dolor,* which gave me, at the end, *I pain, de.solo that an I nevertheless lasts of distrugg for my country,* similar but rather more poetic than the earlier version and even less comprehensible.

Shakespeare, of course, is rich territory for babelizing. "The quality of mercy is not strained" returned from French as "the quality of pity is not tended," which went in and came out of German as "the quality of Pity is not bent," which Italian transformed into "the quality of pity is not folded." "I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him" saw "praise" turn into "congratulate" in French, "bury" become "embed" in Portuguese, and, after some Spanish word-order manipulations, the end result was, "I come to insert to Caesar in congratular it to it of the order no." (Now put that last sentence back in the program as a starting point and see where you get!)

Poor Shakespeare. "It falleth as the gentle rain from heaven" gently evolves into *Falleth appreciates the force of motivatings of the rain of the sky.* And King Lear's magnificent rant, "I shall do such things, I know not what they are, but they shall be the terror of the Earth," suffers a sea-change when the program fails to distinguish the German irregular verb *wissen* ("to know") from the adjective *weiss* ("white") because the German for "I know" is *ich weiss,* and by one route and another we get, "I give the form to such things, the white man of no, of whom which are, are only the terror of the track."

Honest Abe Lincoln's straightforward "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal" picks up an androidal tone on the way back from Italian: "It has dedicated the demand that all the men are manufactured are similar to it towards the outside" and at the finale is: "It dedicated the demand that all the men are manufactured are similar it stop the external part." Alexander Pope's "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing" makes the digital journey and emerges as "Small of the knowledge it is dangerous that."

And when I turned to Lewis Carroll for "And why the sea is boiling hot, and whether pigs have wings," I found myself, via Spanish, with the charmingly Wonderlandish "And because he is to cook to the hot furnace of the sea and if the pigs have the wings." I did not, of course, waste the computer's time on "'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves did gyre and gimbal in the wabe," which I suspected would sound pretty much the same after five translations as it did at the outset. But I did try it on "Twinkle, twinkle, little bat! How I wonder what you're at! Up above the word you fly, like a teatray in the sky," and received this marvelously eloquent French version:

Scintillement, scintillement, petite batte! Comment je me demande a ce que vous etes! Vers le haut de au-dessus du monde vous volez, comme un teatray dans le ciel!"

Which is so beautiful that I almost feared to see what the computer would do to it in English translation. This is what I got:

Flutter, flutter, small beater! How I wonder so that you are! To the top of above the world you fly, like a teatray in the sky!

To the top of above the world, indeed. It's perfect. Flutter, flutter, small beater! I loved it.

The computer program was satisfied too, evidently. It quit right there, refusing to translate those lovely lines into German. "Could not translate" is what I was told, and that itself went through the changes, the Italian version coming forth as "It has not been able translate" and the Spanish as "It could not translates."

But you can. You've got the address. You want to know how Tolkien sounds in Babelese, don't you? What becomes of the clear, rational prose of Robert A. Heinlein as it passes through five European languages? And then there's T.S. Eliot . . . the Book of Revelation . . . Tolstoy . . . Franz Kafka. . . .

It's all yours. Thanks a lot, Jim Caughran, for hours of idle fun. And you too, Carl Tashian, for dreaming up the original software.

Fandom is just an accursed hobby, indeed. ○

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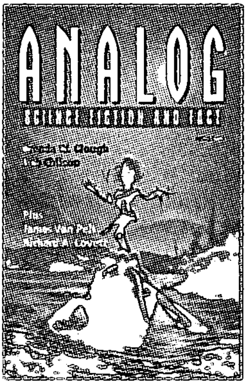
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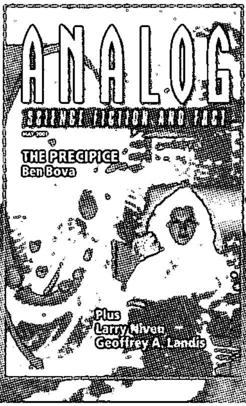
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James Patrick Kelly

HUGO

first

They're about to give a Hugo to a web site.

They? The folks at **ConJose**, <*http://www.conjose.org*> the sixtieth World Science Fiction Convention, which will take place in San Jose, California, August 29 through September 2. *A Hugo?* The **Hugo Awards** <*http://www.wsfs.org/hugos.html*>, officially the Science Fiction Achievement Awards, are presented by the **World Science Fiction Society** <*http://www.wsfs.org*> for excellence in the field of Science Fiction and Fantasy. *A website?* ConJose has defined contenders as "Any generally accessible world wide web site whose subject is primarily related to the field of science fiction, fantasy, or fandom, and which had content generally available during the calendar year 2001."

I'm still trying to decide what I think about this historic first. You see, the Hugos are usually given to a person, as in the Best Fan Writer or Best Professional Artist, an individual work, such as Best Novelette or Best Dramatic Presentation, or a serial publication, for instance, Best Fanzine or Best Semiprozine. To give an award for *best web site* is like giving an award for *best writing*. It's a tad too nebulous for me to wrap my ballot around.

For instance, if I were to award a Jimbo for the best fiction website, my nominees would be **Fictionwise** <*http://www.fictionwise.com*>, **Infinite Matrix** <*http://www.infinitematrix.net*>, **Infinity Plus** <*http://www.infinityplus.co.uk*>, **SCI FICTION** <*http://www.scifi.com/scifiction*>, **Strange Horizons** <*http://www.strangehorizons.com*> and **The Spook** <*http://www.thespook.com*>. And look, already I've mixed apples, oranges, and walnuts here, because some of these are pay sites and others are free, while some publish only original material and others are all-reprints-all-the-time. On the short-list for the Jimbo for most useful science fiction website would be: **The Internet Speculative Fiction DataBase** <*http://www.sfsite.com/isfdb/sfdbase.html*>, **Locus Online** <*http://www.locusmag.com*>, **Scifi.com** <*http://scifi.com*>, **Tangent Online** <*http://www.tangentonline.com*>, **The Science Fiction Writers of America** <*http://www.sfwa.org*>, and **SF Site** <*http://www.sfsite.com*>. Except the ISFDB is part of SF Site and SCI FICTION is an arm of Scifi.com—*ouch,* my head is starting to hurt. Now as far as the Jimbo for SF web sites that are themselves works of art . . . well, that's a whole other column.

Now I certainly don't disapprove of the notion of awarding Hugos for web sites. I just think that it ought to be done right. And I'm certainly willing to cut the folks at ConJose some slack, since what they're doing this year is just an experiment. Under the World Science Fiction Society's **Constitution** <*http://world* *con.org/bm/const-2000.html>*, a worldcon committee can add just one extra category to the Hugos—and for one year only. So there may well be no web site Hugo awarded at next year's Worldcon, **Torcon III** <*http://www.torcon3.on.ca*>. Making the web site Hugo ongoing would mean amending the WSFS Constitution. I'd guess that might happen someday, but when and how depends on the vagaries of fannish politics.

Which we certainly won't be getting into here!

stats

There are a number of web sites devoted to the history of the Hugo. The newest is **Hugo History at a Glance** <*http://web2.airmail.net/tharvia/hugos_at_a_glance.html*>. Webmaster **Teddy Harvia** <*http://web2.airmail.net/tharvia*> has won three of them himself for best fan artist. His Hugo History site consists of a number of concise tables on which you can quickly scan winners and nominees. Make a point of clicking the Novel Covers By Year link, where you can take a grand tour of almost fifty years of SF art.

You'll find the most comprehensive cross-referencing of the Hugos at **The Locus Index to Science Fiction Awards** <*http://www.locusmag.com/SFAwards/index.html*>. Mark R. Kelly has created the most exhaustive (and exhausting!) awards database in the field, with over 2100 individual web pages. The site includes not only the Hugos but all the major awards, like the **Nebulas** <*http://www.sfwa.org/awards*> and the **World Fantasy Awards** <*http://www.worldfantasy.org/awards*>, lots of not-so-major awards and even some defunct awards. Anyone out there remember "the coveted **Balrog"** <*http://www.locusmag.com/SFAwards/Db/Balrog.html*>? You want to know who has won the most major awards? Who has lost the most? Who has lost the most without ever winning? When was the last time someone won both a Hugo and a Nebula for the same book? You can look it up here. Mark helps make sense of all this data with essays introducing the Index and telling us how to best use it. Definitely check out "22 Reasons Why Your Favorite Book/Author Didn't Win (and Someone Else Did)." This is a must-click site for award wonks everywhere.

Yet another ambitious award web site is **AwardWeb: Collections of Literary Award Information and Photos** <*http://www.dpsinfo.com/awardweb/index.html*> where **Laurie Mann** <*http://dpsinfo.com/laurie*> has rounded up not only the usual suspects but has ranged far afield for links to awards sites. For instance, she can point you toward the **Atorox Awards** <*http://org.utu.fi/yhd/tsfs/atorox*>, given by Turku Science Fiction Society for the best science fiction or fantasy published in Finnish. The **Sapphire Awards** <*http://www.sfronline.com/sapphirewins.htm*> are handed out each January for the best science fiction romance—one for a novel and one for short fiction. And then there's this obscure bunch of Swedes who give away something called **The Nobel Prize** <*http://www.nobel.se*>. Seriously, while AwardWeb may not be as cool and analytical as the Locus Index, it covers much the same ground with panache—and a generous helping of photos. Check out the picture of the amazing award swag piled up in the offices of Dell Magazines.

promising

As I write this in March, the awards season is just getting started with the Nebula final ballot just released and the Hugo nominations due to close shortly. However, by the time you read this in the dog days of summer, it will probably be too late to vote for your favorite web site, alas. I have no way of knowing whether any of these sites will be on the ballot, but here are five of the most promising sites I've come across recently.

Stephen Hunt's SF Crowsnest *<http://www.computercrowsnest.com>* bills itself as "Europe's most visited SF/F web site" and it's easy to see why. Started by British writer Stephen Hunt and carried on stylishly by Geoff Willmetts, it's almost as vast as scifi.com but far more personal. You can play games here, read stories, follow the latest news, take part in opinion polls. The SF Crowsnest takes the form of a monthly "magazine" that you can get delivered via email or that you can access on the site. The design here is very slick indeed. For instance, when you read a review or an article or a story from the archive, links to the rest of the content for that particular month are displayed on the same page, so that everything appears in context. In fact, this site offers such a trove of links that I actually had a hard time reviewing the content; I kept buzzing around it like a fly with attention deficit disorder! Check it out if only to see what SF looks like to people who do not necessarily believe that the United States is the center of the known universe.

The **scifi*dimensions*** *<www.scifidimensions.com>* site is another monthly with interviews, articles, and reviews covering books, movies, television, comics, science, and the paranormal—plus original fiction and commentary. Lots of the content on the site is generated by its hard-working editor, John C. Snider of Atlanta, Georgia, although there are also direct links to content provided by other sites, most notably Steve Conley's comics **Bloop** *<http://bloop.tv>* and **Astounding Space Thrills** *<http://209.198.111.169>*. A feature of this site that I particularly liked were the convention reports, mostly filed by John. Here's hoping he gets out more often! Scifi*dimensions* is a little over two years old as I write this and would seem to have a bright future.

SFReader.com *<http://www.sfreader.com/indexsfr.asp>* is a site with big ambitions. Webmaster Dave Felts wants to build an easily searchable database of reviews of novels and anthologies, both new work and reissues. The infrastructure works just fine, but since this would seem to be a fairly new endeavor, there are not that many books reviewed yet. But hey, this may be *your* big chance to break into the reviewing biz.

Fantastic Metropolis *<http://www.sfsite.com/fm>* is a website with an attitude—and a mission. Here's the beginning of an editorial posted on March 15 by World Fantasy Award winner **Jeff VanderMeer** *<http://www.vandermeer.redsine.com>*: "One aspect of fantastical literature that concerns me deeply and which has universal implications is the relative paucity of unique, interesting imaginations within fiction today. Too many writers and readers prefer their literature spoon-fed to them, in portions similar to the last, with the same smells and colors, served to them on the same worn dishes, and accompanied by the same polite conversation." *Gulp* . . . I fear Jeff may be talking about you and me, dear readers. Founded by provocateur Gabe Chouinard, Fantastic Metropolis is often polemical but never dull in its attempt to remake the genre. Fortunately, it isn't just about critique; Fantastic Metropolis reprints a generous helping of the fiction it advocates, with contributions from Michael Moorcook, **L. Timmel Duchamp** <*http://ltimmel.home.mindspring.com*>, **James Sallis** <*http://www.btinternet.com/~richnabi/SALLIS*>, and **Kelly Link** <*http://www.kellylink.net*>, to name but a few. While I may disagree with some of the opinions expressed here, I stop by regularly to have my artistic conscience checked.

RevolutionSF <*http://www.revolutionsf.com*> is the second site listed on Fantastic Metropolis's Partners page. It's hard to tell exactly what their relationship, if any, is. But while FM is a site that takes itself very seriously, RevolutionSF laces its content with a deadly sense of humor. If web sites could have weird alien sex, then this would be the love child of Locus, SCI FICTION and **The Onion** <*http://www.theonion.com*>. Produced by Shane Ivey, formerly of Zealot.com, and a very talented staff, RevolutionSF delivers the news, reviews, opinion, contests, and a generous helping of first rate fiction by writers **Brian A. Hopkins** <*http://bahwolf.com*>, **Don Webb** <*gopher://gopher.well.com/11/cyberpunk/donwebb*>, **Lewis Shiner** <*http://www.lewisshiner.com*>, and many more. If this was all that RevolutionSF had to offer, it would still be a contender for one of the best new sites around. But consider that they were the perpetrators of the **Tina Brown To Edit Asimov's** <*http://www.revolutionsf.com/article/843.html*> and the **International Slushpile Bonfire Day** <*http://www.revolutionsf.com/article/950.html*> hoax pages. This is a site you should periodically click for your own mental health.

exit

In 1863 there was a dustup in the art world. It seems that the French government sponsored an official exhibition every year called the *Salon,* held in the Salon d'Apollon, in the Louvre. Paintings and sculpture for the show were selected by a jury. Some artists complained that the jury was applying outmoded standards in deciding what would be admitted to the *Salon* and what would be rejected. These artists argued that the once-great rivals, the neoclassical and romantic movements, were now exhausted and had sunk into self-parody. These artists claimed they had a new way of looking at the world, and since they were being turned down for the official *Salon,* they demanded a *Salon* of their own. So Napoleon III agreed to sponsor a *Salon des Refusés,* where the snubbed artists could exhibit their art. In 1873 a French critic came up with a name for these malcontents. He called them the *Impressionists,* and in the years that followed they were everywhere triumphant.

What does this obscure bit of art history have to do with the Hugo award? Consider that if winning a Hugo award is our modern SF equivalent of entry into the Salon, then perhaps there are Impressionist-equivalents already among us, waiting impatiently to show the world what they've got. ○

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Over the years, several of Robert Silverberg's Roma stories have appeared in our pages. These publications include "Via Roma" (April 1994), "Waiting for the End" (October/November 1998), "The Second Wave" (August 2002), and his latest tale, "With Caesar in the Underworld." Readers will find another story, "The Reign of Terror," in our April 2003 issue.

In June 2003, HarperEos will bring out a collection of all the Roma tales under the title *Roma Eterna*.

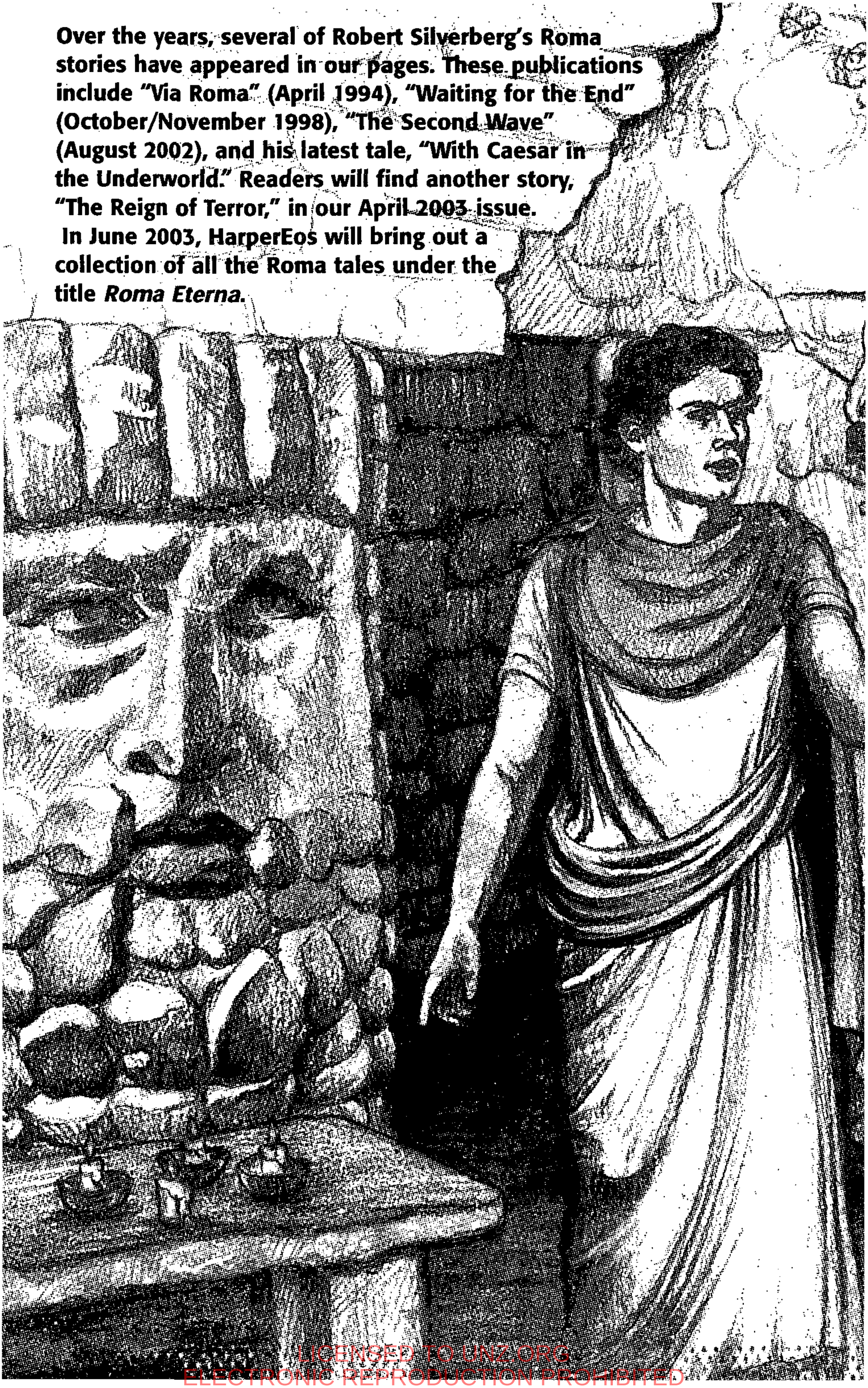
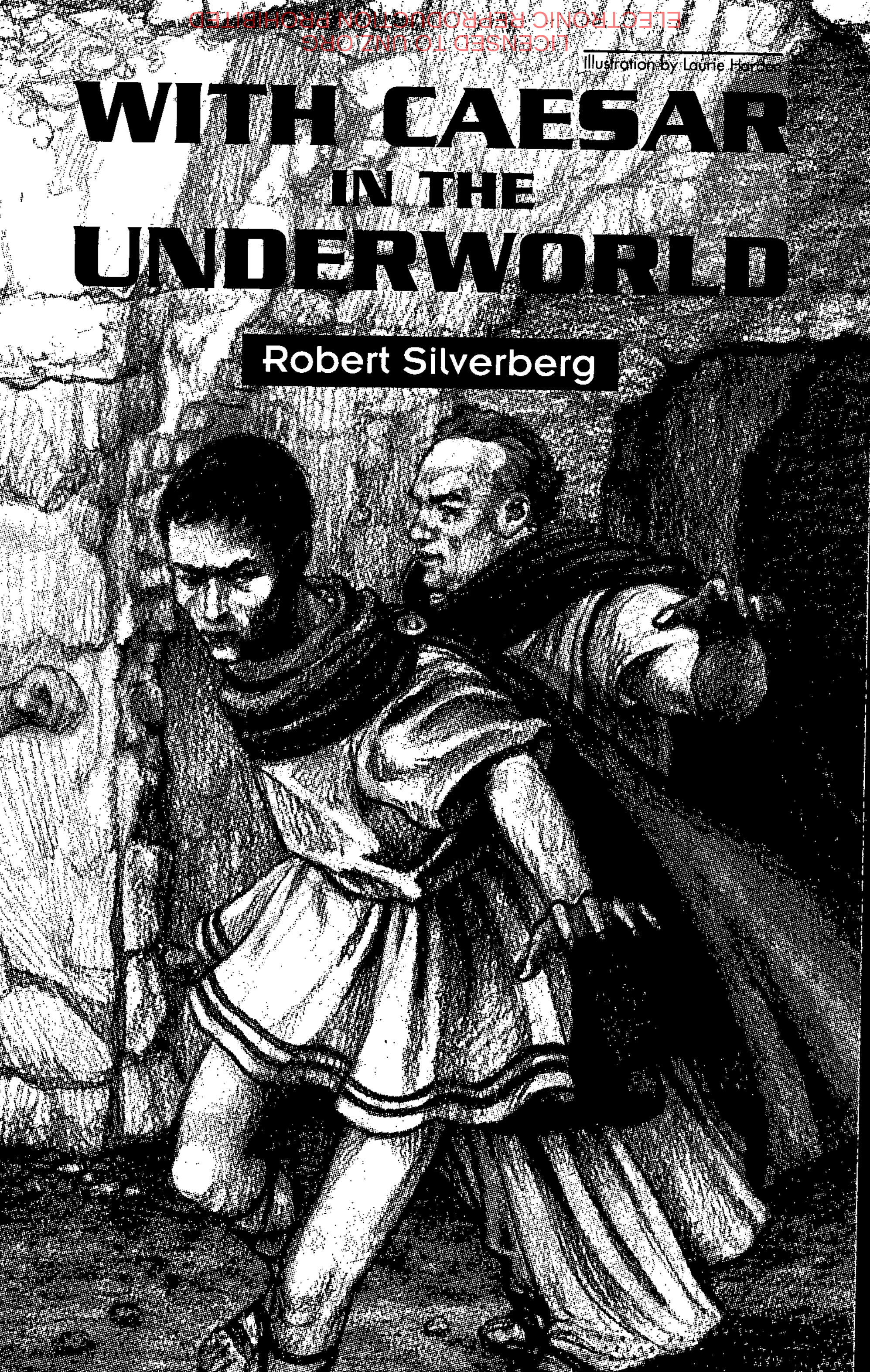


Illustration by Laurie Hard

WITH CAESAR IN THE UNDERWORLD

Robert Silverberg



Over the past fifteen years I've sporadically been developing an alternate-world scenario in which the Hebrew exodus from Egypt under Moses never happened. Since the Jews never reached Palestine, Christianity never developed and Rome remained pagan, renewing itself constantly during the period we call the Dark Ages, fending off the invasions of the barbarians and sustaining itself as a thriving worldwide empire for thousands of years. The history of Rome in this alternate world is more or less identical (aside from a somewhat different sequence of third-century emperors) to that of our *Rome as it developed through the fourth century A.D., when Constantine the Great first divided the Empire into eastern and western domains, but then things begin to diverge.*

The timeline of the Roma Eterna stories runs from 753 B.C., the traditional date of the founding of the city; our year 2002 is 2755 by Roman reckoning. Thus the story "Waiting for the End" (Asimov's, *October/November 1998) is set in the Roman year 1951, which is A.D. 1198 by our calendrical system. That one told of the invasion and conquest of Rome by its neighbor to the east, the Eastern—or Byzantine—Empire. This newest story, "With Caesar in the Underworld," is set more than six hundred years earlier, in the Roman year 1282 (A.D. 529), at a time when the Eastern and Western halves of the Empire, though independent from each other, are on friendlier terms.*

—Robert Silverberg

The newly arrived ambassador from the Eastern emperor was rather younger than Faustus had expected him to be: a smallish sort, finely built, quite handsome in what was almost a girlish kind of way, though obviously very capable and sharp, a man who would bear close watching. There was something a bit frightening about him, though not at first glance. He gleamed with the imperviousness of fine armor. His air of sophisticated and fastidious languor coupled with hidden strength made Faustus, a tall, robust, florid-faced man going thick through the waist and thin about the scalp, feel positively plebeian and coarse despite his own lofty and significant ancestry.

That morning Faustus, whose task as an official of the Chancellery it was to greet all such important visitors to the capital city, had gone out to Ostia to meet him at the Imperial pier—the Greek envoy, coming west by way of Sicilia, had sailed up the coast from Neapolis in the south—and had escorted him to the rooms in the old Severan Palace where the occasional ambassadors from the Eastern half of the Empire were housed. Now it was the time to begin establishing a little rapport. They faced each other across an onyx-slab table in the Lesser Hall of Columns, which several reigns ago had been transformed into a somewhat oversized sitting-room. A certain amount of preliminary social chatter was required at this point. Faustus called for some wine, one of the big, elegant wines from the great vineyards of Gallia Transalpina.

After they had had a chance to savor it for a little while he said, wanting to get the ticklish part of the situation out in the open right away, "The prince Heraclius himself, unfortunately, has been called without warning to the northern frontier. Therefore tonight's dinner has been canceled. This will be a free evening for you, then, an evening for resting after your long journey. I trust that that'll be acceptable to you."

"Ah," said the Greek, and his lips tightened for an instant. Plainly he was a little bewildered at being left on his own like this, his first evening in Roma. He studied his perfectly manicured fingers. When he glanced up again, there was a gleam of concern in the dark eyes. "I won't be seeing the emperor either, then?"

"The emperor is in very poor health. He will not be able to see you tonight and perhaps not for several days. The prince Heraclius has taken over many of his responsibilities. But in the prince's unexpected and unavoidable absence your host and companion for your first few days in Roma will be his younger brother Maximilianus. You will, I know, find him amusing and very charming, my lord Menandros."

"Unlike his brother, I gather," said the Greek ambassador coolly.

Only too true, Faustus thought. But it was a remarkably blunt thing to say. Faustus searched for the motive behind the little man's words. Menandros had come here, after all, to negotiate a marriage between his royal master's sister and the very prince of whom he had just spoken so slightingly. When a diplomat as polished as this finely oiled Greek said something as egregiously undiplomatic as that, there was usually a good reason for it. Perhaps, Faustus supposed, Menandros was simply showing annoyance at the fact that Prince Heraclius had tactlessly managed not to be on hand to welcome him upon his entry into Roma.

Faustus was not going to let himself be drawn any deeper into comparisons, though. He allowed himself only an oblique smile, that faint sidewise smile he had learned from his young friend the Caesar Maximilianus. "The two brothers are quite different in personality, that I do concede. —Will you have more wine, your excellence?"

That brought yet another shift of tone. "Ah, no formalities, no formalities, I pray you. Let us be friends, you and I." And then, leaning forward cozily and shifting from the formal to the intimate form of speech: "You must call me Menandros. I will call you Faustus. Eh, my friend? —And yes, more wine, by all means. What excellent stuff! We have nothing that can match it in Constantinopolis. What sort is it, actually?"

Faustus flicked a glance at one of the waiting servitors, who quickly refilled the bowls. "A wine from Gallia," he said. "I forget the name." A swift flash of unmistakable displeasure, quickly concealed but not quickly enough, crossed the Greek's face. To be caught praising a provincial wine so highly must have embarrassed him. But embarrassing him had not been Faustus's intention. There was nothing to be gained by creating discomfort for so powerful and potentially valuable a personage as the lord of the East's ambassador to the Western court.

This was all getting worse and worse. Hastily Faustus set about smoothing the awkwardness over. "The heart of our production lies in Gallia, now. The emperor's cellars contain scarcely any Italian wines at all, they tell me. Scarcely any! These Gallian reds are His Imperial Majesty's preference by far, I assure you."

"While I am here I must acquire some, then, for the cellars of His Majesty Justinianus," said Menandros.

They drank a moment in silence. Faustus felt as though he were dancing on swords.

"This is, I understand, your first visit to Urbs Roma?" Faustus asked, when the silence had gone on just a trifle too long. He took care to use the familiar form too, now that Menandros had started it.

"My first, yes. Most of my career has been spent in Aegyptus and Syria."

Faustus wondered how extensive that career could have been. This Menandros seemed to be no more than twenty-five or so, thirty at the ut-most. Of course, all these smooth-skinned dark-eyed Greeks, buffed and oiled and pomaded in their Oriental fashion, tended to look younger than they really were. And now that Faustus had passed fifty, he was finding it harder and harder to make distinctions of age in any precise way: everybody around him at the court seemed terribly young to him now, a congregation of mere boys and girls. Of those who had ruled the Empire when Faustus himself was young, there was no one left except the weary, lonely old emperor himself, and hardly anyone had laid eyes on the emperor in recent times. Of Faustus's own generation of courtiers, some had died off, the others had gone into cozy retirement far away. Faustus was a dozen years older than his own superior minister in the Chancellery. His closest friend here now was Maximilianus Caesar, who was considerably less than half his age. From the beginning Faustus had always regarded himself as a relic of some earlier era, because that was, in truth, what he was, considering that he was a member of a family that had held the throne three dynasties ago; but the phrase had taken on a harsh new meaning for him in these latter days, now that he had survived not just his family's greatness but even his own contemporaries.

It was a little disconcerting that Justinianus had sent so youthful and apparently inexperienced an ambassador on so delicate a mission. But Faustus suspected it would be a mistake to underestimate this man; and at least Menandros's lack of familiarity with the capital city would provide him with a convenient way to glide past whatever difficulties Prince Heraclius's untimely absence might cause in the next few days.

Stagily Faustus clapped his hands. "How I envy you, friend Menandros! To see Urbs Roma in all its splendor for the first time! What an overwhelming experience it will be for you! We who were born here, who take it all for granted, can never appreciate it as you will. The grandeur. The magnificence." Yes, yes, he thought, let Maximilianus march him from one end of the city to the other until Heraclius gets back. We will dazzle him with our wonders and after a time he'll forget how discourteously Heraclius has treated him. "While you're waiting for the Caesar to return, we'll arrange the most extensive tours for you. All the great temples—the amphitheater—the baths—the Forum—the Capitol—the palaces—the wonderful gardens—"

"The grottos of Titus Gallius," Menandros said, unexpectedly. "The underground temples and shrines. The marketplace of the sorcerers. The catacomb of the holy Chaldean prostitutes. The pool of the Baptai. The labyrinth of the Maenads. The caverns of the witches."

"Ah? So you know of those places too?"

"Who doesn't know about the Underworld of Urbs Roma? It's the talk of the whole Empire." In an instant that bright metallic façade of his seemed to melt away, and all his menacing poise. Something quite different was visible in Menandros's eyes now, a wholly uncalculated eagerness, an undisguised boyish enthusiasm. And a certain roguishness, too, a hint of rough, coarse appetites that belied his urbane gloss. In a soft, confiding tone he said, "May I confess something, Faustus? Magnificence bores me. I've got a bit of a taste for the low life. All that dodgy stuff that Roma's so famous for, the dark, seamy underbelly of the city, the whores and the magicians, the freak shows and the orgies and the thieves' markets, the strange shrines of your weird cults—do I shock you, Faustus? Is this dreadfully undiplomatic of me to admit? I don't need a tour of the temples. But as long as we have a few days before I have to get down to serious business, it's the other side of Roma I want to see, the mysterious side, the dark side. We have temples and palaces enough in Constantinopolis, and baths, and all the rest of that. Miles and miles of glorious shining marble, until you want to cry out for mercy. But the true subterranean mysteries, the earthy, dirty, smelly, underground things, ah, no, Faustus, those are what really interest me. We've rooted all that stuff out, at Constantinopolis. It's considered dangerous decadent nonsense."

"It is here, too," said Faustus quietly.

"Yes, but you permit it! You revel in it, even! Or so I'm told, on pretty good authority. —You heard me say I was formerly stationed in Aegyptus and Syria. The ancient East, that is to say, thousands of years older than Roma or Constantinopolis. Most of the strange cults originated there, you know. That was where I developed my interest in them. And the things I've seen and heard and done in places like Damascus and Alexandria and Antioch, well—but nowadays Urbs Roma is the center of everything of that sort, is it not, the capital of marvels! And I tell you, Faustus, what I truly crave experiencing is—"

He halted in midsentence, looking flushed and a little stunned.

"This wine," he said, with a little shake of his head. "I've been drinking it too quickly. It must be stronger than I thought."

Faustus reached across the table and laid his hand gently on the younger man's wrist. "Have no fear, my friend. These revelations of yours cause me no dismay. I am no stranger to the Underworld, nor is the prince Maximilianus. And while we await the return of Prince Heraclius he and I will show you everything you desire." He rose, stepping back a couple of paces so that he would not seem, in his bulky way, to be looming in an intimidating manner over the reclining ambassador. After a bad start he had regained some advantage; he didn't want to push it too far. "I'll leave you now. You've had a lengthy journey, and you'll want your rest. I'll send in your servants. In addition to those who accompanied you from Constantinopolis, these men and women—" he indicated the slaves who stood arrayed in the shadows around the room— "are at your command day and night. They are yours. Ask them for anything. *Anything,* my lord Menandros."

His palanquin and bearers were waiting outside. "Take me to the apartments of the Caesar," Faustus said crisply, and clambered inside.

They knew which Caesar he meant. In Roma the name could be applied to a great many persons of high birth, from the emperor on down—Faustus himself had some claim to using it—but as a rule, these days, it was an appellation employed only in reference to the two sons of the emperor Maximilianus II. And, whether or not Faustus's bearers happened to be aware that the elder son was out of town, they were clever enough to understand that their master would in all probability not be asking them to take him to the chambers of the austere and dreary Prince Heraclius. No, no, it was the younger son, the pleasantly dissolute Maximilianus Caesar, whose rooms would surely be his chosen destination: Prince Maximilianus, the friend, the companion, the dearest and most special friend and companion, for all intents and purposes at the present time the *only* true friend and companion, of that aging and ever lonelier minor official of the Imperial court, Faustus Flavius Constantinus Caesar.

Maximilianus lived over at the far side of the Palatine, in a handsome pink-marble palace of relatively modest size that had been occupied by younger sons of the emperor for the past half dozen reigns or so. The prince, a red-haired, blue-eyed, long-limbed man who was a match for Faustus in height but lean and rangy where Faustus was burly and ponderous, peeled himself upward from a divan as Faustus entered and greeted him with a warm embrace and a tall beaker of chilled white wine. That Faustus had been drinking red with the Greek ambassador for the past hour and a half did not matter now. Maximilianus, in his capacity as prince of the royal blood, had access to the best caves of the Imperial cellars, and what was most pleasing to the prince's palate was the rare white wines of the Alban Hills, the older and sweeter and colder the better. When Faustus was with him, the white wines of the Alban Hills were what Faustus drank.

"Look at these," Maximilianus said, before Faustus had had a chance to say anything whatever beyond a word of appreciation for the wine. The prince drew forth a long, fat pouch of purple velvet and with a great sweeping gesture sent a blazing hoard of jewelry spilling out on the table: a tangled mass of necklaces, earrings, rings, pendants, all of them evidently fashioned from opals set in filigree of gold, opals of every hue and type, pink ones, milky ones, opals of shimmering green, midnight black, fiery scarlet. Maximilianus exultantly scooped them up in both hands and let them dribble through his fingers. His eyes were glowing. He appeared enthralled by the brilliant display.

Faustus stared puzzledly at the sprawling scatter of bright trinkets. These were extremely beautiful baubles, yes: but the degree of Maximilianus's excitement over them seemed excessive. Why was the prince so fascinated by them? "Very pretty," Faustus said. "Are they something you won at the gambling tables? Or did you buy these trinkets as a gift for one of your ladies?"

"Trinkets!" Maximilianus cried. "The jewels of Cybele is what they are! The treasure of the high priestess of the Great Mother! Aren't they lovely, Faustus? The Hebrew brought them just now. They're stolen, of course. From the goddess's most sacred sanctuary. I'm going to give them to my new sister-in-law as a wedding present."

"Stolen? From the sanctuary? Which sanctuary? Which Hebrew? What are you talking about, Maximilianus?"

The prince grinned and pressed one of the biggest of the pendants into the fleshy palm of Faustus's left hand, closing Faustus's fingers tightly over it. He gave Faustus a broad wink. "Hold it. Squeeze it. Feel the throbbing magic of the goddess pouring into you. Is your cock getting stiff yet? That's what should be happening, Faustus. Amulets of fertility are what we have here. Of enormous efficacy. In the sanctuary, the priestess wears them and anyone she touches with the stone becomes an absolute seething mass of procreative energy. Heraclius's princess will conceive an heir for him the first time he gets inside her. It's virtually guaranteed. The dynasty continues. My little favor for my chilly and sexless brother. I'll explain it all to his beloved, and she'll know what to do. Eh? Eh?" Maximilianus amiably patted Faustus's belly. "What are you feeling down there, old man?"

Faustus handed the pendant back. "What I feel is that you may have gone a little too far this time. Who did you get these things from? Danielus bar-Heap?"

"Bar-Heap, yes, of course. Who else?"

"And where did he get them? Stole them from the Temple of the Great Mother, did he? Strolled through the grotto one dark night and slipped into the sanctuary when the priestesses weren't looking?" Faustus closed his eyes, put his hand across them, blew his breath outward through closed lips in a noisy, rumbling burst of astonishment and disapproval. He was even shocked, a little. That was something of an unusual emotion for him. Maximilianus was the only man in the realm capable of making him feel stodgy and priggish. "In the name of Jove Almighty, Maximilianus, tell me how you think you can give stolen goods as a wedding gift! For a royal wedding, no less. Don't you think there'll be an outcry raised from here to India and back when the high priestess finds out that this stuff is missing?"

Maximilianus, offering Faustus his sly, inward sort of smile, gathered the jewelry back into the pouch. "You grow silly in your dotage, old man. Is it your idea that these jewels were stolen from the sanctuary yesterday? As a matter of fact, it happened during the reign of Marcus Anastasius, which was—what? Two hundred fifty years ago?—and the sanctuary they were stolen from wasn't here at all, it was somewhere in Phrygia, wherever that may be, and they've had at least five legitimate owners since then, which is certainly enough to disqualify them as stolen goods by this time. It happens also that I paid good hard cash for them. I told the Hebrew that I needed a fancy wedding present for the elder Caesar's bride, and he said that this little collection was on the market, and I said, fine, get them for me, and I gave him enough gold pieces to outweigh *two* fat Faustuses, and he went down into the Jewelers' Grotto this very night past and closed the deal, and here they are. I want to see the look on my dear brother's face when I present these treasures to his lovely bride Sabbatia, gifts truly worthy of a queen. And then when I tell him about the special powers they're supposed to have. 'Beloved brother,'" Maximilianus said, in a high, piping tone of savage derision, "'I thought you might need some aid in consummating your marriage, and therefore I advise you to have your bride wear this ring on the wedding night, and to put this bracelet upon her wrist, and also to invite your lady to drape this pendant between her breasts—'"

Faustus felt the beginnings of a headache. There were times when the Caesar's madcap exuberance was too much even for him. In silence he helped himself to more wine, and drank it down in deep, slow, deliberate drafts. Then he walked toward the window and stood with his back toward the prince.

Could he trust what Maximilianus was telling him about the provenance of these jewels? Had they in fact been taken from the sanctuary in antiquity, or had some thief snatched them just the other day? That would be all we need, he thought. Right in the middle of the negotiations for a desperately needed military alliance that were scheduled to follow the marriage of the Western prince and the Eastern princess, the pious and exceedingly virtuous Justinianus discovers that his new brother-in-law's brother has blithely given the sister of the Eastern emperor a stolen and sacrilegious wedding gift. A gift that even now might be the object of an intensive police search.

Maximilianus was still going on about the jewels. Faustus paid little attention. A soothing drift of cool air floated toward him out of the twilight, carrying with it a delightfully complex mingling of odors, cinnamon, pepper, nutmeg, roasted meat, rich wine, pungent perfume, the tang of sliced lemons, all the wondrous aromas of some nearby lavish banquet. It was quite refreshing.

Under the benign mellowing influence of the fragrant breeze from outside Faustus felt his little fit of scrupulosity beginning to pass. There was nothing to worry about here, really. Very likely the transaction had been legitimate. But even if the opals *had* just been stolen from the Great Mother's sanctuary, there would be little that the outraged priestesses could do about it, since the police investigation was in no way likely to reach into the household of the Imperial family. And that Maximilianus's gift was reputed to have aphrodisiac powers would be a fine joke on his prissy, tight-lipped brother.

Faustus felt a great sudden surge of love for his friend Maximilianus pass through him. Once again the prince had shown him that although he was only half his age, he was more than his equal in all-around deviltry; and that was saying quite a lot.

"Did the ambassador show you a picture of her, by the way?" Maximilianus asked.

Faustus glanced around. "Why should he? I'm not the one who's marrying her."

"I was just curious. I was wondering if she's as ugly as they say. The word is that she looks just like her brother, you know. And Justinianus has the face of a horse. She's a lot older than Heraclius, too."

"Is she? I hadn't heard."

"Justinianus is forty-five or so, right? Is it likely that he would have a sister of eighteen or twenty?"

"She could be twenty-five, perhaps."

"Thirty-five, more likely. Or even older. Heraclius is twenty-nine. My brother is going to marry an ugly old woman. Who may not even still be of childbearing age—has anyone considered that?"

"An ugly old woman, if that's indeed the case, who happens to be the sister of the Eastern emperor," Faustus pointed out, "and who therefore will create a blood bond between the two halves of the realm that will be very useful to us when we ask Justinianus to lend us a few legions to help us fend off the barbarians in the north, now that our friends the Goths and the Vandals are chewing on our toes up there again. Whether she's of childbearing age is incidental. Heirs to the throne can always be adopted, you know."

"Yes. Of course they can. But the main thing, the grand alliance—is that so important, Faustus? If the smelly barbarians have come back for another round, why can't we fend them off ourselves? My father managed a pretty good job of that when they came sniffing around our frontiers in '42, didn't he? Not to mention what his grandfather did to Attila and his Huns some fifty years before that."

"'42 was a long time ago," Faustus said. "Your father's old and sick now. And we're currently a little short on great generals."

"What about Heraclius? He might amaze us all."

"Heraclius?" said Faustus. That was a startling thought—the aloof, waspish, ascetic Heraclius Caesar leading an army in the field. Even Maximilianus, frivolous and undisciplined and rowdy as he was, would make a more plausible candidate for the role of military hero than the pallid Heraclius.

With a mock-haughty sniff Maximilianus said, "I remind you, my lord Faustus, that we're a fighting dynasty. We have the blood of mighty warriors in our veins, my brother and I."

"Yes, the mighty warrior Heraclius," Faustus said acidly, and they both laughed.

"All right, then. I yield the point. We do need Justinianus's help, I suppose. So my brother marries the ugly princess, *her* brother helps us smash the savage hairy men of the north for once and all, and the whole Empire embarks upon a future of eternal peace, except perhaps for a squabble or two with the Persians, who are Justinianus's problem, not ours. Well, so be it. In any case, why should I care what Heraclius's wife looks like? *He* probably won't."

"True." The heir to the throne was not notorious for his interest in women.

"The Great Mother's jewels, if their reputation has any substance to it, will help him quickly engender a new little Caesar, let us hope. After which, he'll probably never lay a finger on her again, to her great relief and his, eh?" Maximilianus bounded up from his divan to pour more wine for Faustus, and for himself. "Has he really gone up north to inspect the troops, by the way? That's the tale I've heard, anyway."

"And I," said Faustus. "It's the official story, but I have my doubts. More likely he's headed off to his forests for a few days of hunting, by way of ducking the marriage issue as long as he can." That was the Caesar Heraclius's only known amusement, the tireless, joyless pursuit of stag and boar and fox and hare. "Let me tell you, the Greek ambassador was more than a little miffed when he found out that the prince had chosen the very week of his arrival to leave town. He let it be known very clearly how annoyed he was. Which brings me to the main reason for this visit, in fact. I have work for you. It becomes your job and mine to keep the ambassador amused until Heraclius deigns to get back here."

Maximilianus responded with a lazy shrug. "Your job, perhaps. But why is it mine, old friend?"

"Because I think you'll enjoy it, once you know what I have in mind. And I've already committed you to it, besides, and you don't dare let me down. The ambassador wants to go on a tour of Roma—but not to the usual tourist attractions. He's interested in getting a look at the Underworld."

The Caesar's eyes widened. "He is? An ambassador, going *there?*"

"He's young. He's Greek. He may be pretty kinky, or else he'd simply like to be. I said that you and I would show him temples and palaces, and he said to show him the grottos and the whorehouses. The marketplace of the sorcerers, the caverns of the witches, that sort of thing. 'I've got a bit of a taste for the low life' is what he told me," Faustus said, in a passable imitation of the drawling tones of Menandros's Eastern-accented Latin. " 'The dark, seamy underbelly of the city' is the very phrase he used. " 'All that dodgy stuff that Roma's so famous for.' "

"A tourist," Maximilianus said, with scorn. "He just wants to take a tour that's slightly different from the standard one."

"Whatever. At any rate, I have to keep him entertained, and with your brother hiding out in the woods and your father ill I need to trot forth some other member of the Imperial family to play host for him, and who else is there but you? It's no more than half a day since he arrived in town and Heraclius has succeeded in offending him already, without even being here. The more annoyed he gets, the harder a bargain he's going to drive once your brother shows up. He's tougher than he looks and it's dangerous to underestimate him. If I leave him stewing in his own irritation for the next few days, there may be big trouble."

"Trouble? Of what sort? He can't call off the marriage just because he feels snubbed."

"No, I suppose he can't. But if he gets his jaw set the wrong way, he may report back to Justinianus that the next emperor of the West is a bumbling fool not worth wasting soldiers on, let alone a sister. The princess Sabbatia quietly goes back to Constantinopolis a few months after the wedding and we get left to deal with the barbarians on our own. I like to think I'll be able to head all that off if I can distract the ambassador for a week or two by showing him a little dirty fun in the catacombs. You can help me with that. We've had some good times down there, you and I, eh, my friend? Now we can take him to some of our favorite places. Yes? Agreed?"

"May I bring along the Hebrew?" Maximilianus asked. "To be our guide. He knows the Underworld even better than we do."

"Danielus bar-Heap, you mean."

"Yes. Bar-Heap."

"By all means," said Faustus. "The more the merrier."

It was too late in the evening by the time he left Maximilianus's to go to the baths. Faustus returned to his own quarters instead and called for a hot bath, a massage, and, afterward, the slave-girl Oalathea, that dusky, lithe little sixteen-year-old Numidian with whom the only language Faustus had in common was that of Eros.

A long day it had been, and a hard, wearying one. He hadn't expected to find Heraclius gone when he came back from Ostia with the Eastern ambassador. Since the old emperor Maximilianus was in such poor shape, the plan had been for the Greek ambassador to dine with Prince Heraclius on his first evening at the capital; but right after Faustus had set off for Ostia Heraclius had abruptly skipped out of the city, leaving behind the flimsy inspecting-the-northern-troops excuse. With the emperor unwell and Heraclius away, there was no one of appropriate rank available to serve as official host at a state dinner except Heraclius's rapscallion brother Maximilianus, and none of the officials of the royal household had felt sufficiently audacious to propose *that* without getting Faustus's approval first. So the state dinner had simply been scrubbed that afternoon, a fact that Faustus had not discovered until his return from the port. By then it was too late to do anything about that, other than to send a frantic message after the vanished prince imploring him to head back to Urbs Roma as quickly as possible. If Heraclius had indeed gone hunting, the message would reach him at his forest lodge in the woods out beyond Lake Nemorensis, and perhaps, perhaps, he would pay heed to it. If he had, against all probability, really gone to the military frontier, he was unlikely to return very soon. And that left only the Caesar Maximilianus, willy-nilly, to do the job. A risky business, that could be.

Well, the ambassador's little confession of a bit of a taste for the low life had taken care of the issue of keeping him entertained, at least for the next couple of days. If slumming in the Underworld was what Menandros was truly after, then Maximilianus would become the solution instead of the problem.

Faustus leaned back in the bath, savoring the warmth of the water, enjoying the sweet smell of the oils floating on the surface. It was while in the bath that proper Romans of the olden days—Seneca, say, or the poet Lucan, or that fierce old harridan Antonia, the mother of the emperor Claudius—would take the opportunity to slit their wrists rather than continue to endure the inadequacies and iniquities of the society in which they lived. But these were not the olden days, and Faustus was not as offended by the inadequacies and iniquities of society as those grand old Romans had been, and, in any event, suicide as a general concept was not something that held great appeal for him.

Still, it certainly was a sad time for Roma, he thought. The old emperor as good as dead, the heir to the throne a ninny and a prude, the emperor's other son a wastrel, and the barbarians, who were supposed to have been crushed years ago, once again knocking at the gates. Faustus knew that he was no model of the ancient Roman virtues himself—who was, five centuries after Augustus's time?—but, for all his own weaknesses and foibles, he could not help crying out within himself, sometimes, at the tawdriness of the epoch. We call ourselves Romans, he thought, and we know how to imitate, up to a point, the attitudes and poses of our great Roman forebears. But that's all we do:

strike attitudes and imitate poses. We merely play at being Romans, and deceive ourselves, sometimes, into accepting the imitation for the reality.

It is a sorry era, Faustus told himself.

He was of royal blood himself, more or less. His very name proclaimed that: Faustus Flavius Constantinus Caesar. Embedded within it was the cognomen of his famous imperial ancestor, Constantinus the Great, and along with it the name of Constantinus's wife Fausta, herself the daughter of the emperor Maximianus. The dynasty of Constantinus had long vanished from the scene, of course, but by various genealogical zigs and zags Faustus could trace his descent back to it, and that entitled him to add the illustrious name "Caesar" to his array. Even so he was merely a secondary official in the chancellery of Maximilianus II Augustus, and his father before him had been an officer of trifling rank in the Army of the North, and his father before him—well, Faustus thought, best not to think of *him*. The family had had some reverses in the course of the two centuries since Constantinus the Great had occupied the throne. But no one could deny his lineage, and there were times when he found himself secretly looking upon the current royal family as mere newcomers to power, jumped up out of nowhere. Of course, the early emperors, Augustus and Tiberius and Claudius and such, would have looked even upon Constantinus the Great as a jumped-up newcomer; and the great men of the old Republic, Camillus, for instance, or Claudius Marcellus, would probably have thought the same of Augustus and Tiberius. Ancestry was a foolish game to play, Faustus thought. The past existed here in Roma in layer upon layer, a past that was nearly thirteen hundred years deep, and everyone had been a jumped-up newcomer once upon a time, even the founder Romulus himself.

So the era of the great Constantinus had come and gone, and here was his distant descendant Faustus Flavius Constantinus Caesar, growing old, growing plump, growing bald, spending his days toiling in the middle echelons of the Imperial Chancellery. And the Empire itself seemed to be aging badly too. Everything had gone soft, here in the final years of the long reign of Maximilianus II. The great days of Titus Gallius and his dynasty, of Constantinus and his, of the first Maximilianus and his son and grandson, seemed already like something out of the legends of antiquity, even if the second Maximilianus still did hold the throne. Things had changed, in the past decade or two. The Empire no longer seemed as secure as it had been. And all this year there had been talk, all up and down the shadowy corridors of the sorcerers' marketplace, of mystic oracular prophecies, lately found in a newly discovered manuscript of the Sybilline Books, that indicated that Roma had entered into its last century, after which would come fire, apocalyptic chaos, the collapse of everything.

If that is so, Faustus thought, let it wait another twenty or thirty years. Then the world can come to an end, for all that I will care.

But it was something new, this talk of the end of eternal Roma. For hundreds of years now, there had always been some great man available to step in and save things in time of crisis. Three hundred and some years ago, Septimius Severus had been there to rescue the Empire from crazy Commodus. A generation later, after Severus's even crazier son Caracalla had worked all sorts of harm, it was the superb Titus Gallius who took charge and repaired the damage. The barbarians were beginning to make serious trouble at the Empire's edges by then, but, again and again, strong emperors beat them back: first Titus Gallius, then his nephew Gaius Martius, and Marcus Anastasius after him, and then Diocletianus, the first emperor to divide the realm among jointly ruling emperors, and Constantinus, who founded the second capital in the East, and on and on, down to the present time. But now the throne was to all intents and purposes vacant, and everyone could see that the heir-in-waiting was worthless, and where, Faustus wondered, was the next great savior of the realm to come from?

Prince Maximilianus was right that his own dynasty had been a line of mighty warriors. Maximilianus I, a northerner, not a Roman of Roma at all but a man who could trace his roots back to the long-ago Etruscan race, had founded that line when he made himself the successor to the great emperor Theodosius on the Imperial throne. As a vigorous young general he drove back the Goths who were threatening Italia's northern border, and then in the autumn of his years joined with Theodosius II of the Eastern Empire to smash the Hunnish invaders under Attila. Then came Maximilianus's son Heraclius I, who held the line on all frontiers, and when the next wave of Goths and their kinsmen the Vandals began rampaging through Gallia and the Germanic lands, Heraclius's son, the young emperor Maximilianus II, cut them to pieces with a fierce counterattack that seemed to have ended their threat for all time.

But no: there seemed to be no end of Goths and Vandals and similar nomadic tribes. Here, forty years after Maximilianus II had marched with twenty legions across the Rhenus into Gallia and inflicted a decisive defeat on them, they were massing for what looked like the biggest attack since the days of Theodosius. Now, though, Maximilianus II was old and feeble, very likely dying. The best anyone could say was that the emperor was dwelling in seclusion somewhere, seen only by his doctors, but there were a great many unreliable stories circulating about his location: perhaps he was here in Roma, perhaps on the isle of Capraeae down in the south, or maybe even in Carthago or Volubilis or some other sun-blessed African city. For all Faustus knew, he was already dead, and his panicky ministers were afraid to release the news. It would not be the first time in Roma's history that that had happened.

And after Maximilianus II, what? Prince Heraclius would take the throne, yes. But there was no reason to be optimistic about the sort of emperor that he would be. Faustus could imagine the course of events only too easily: the Goths, unstoppable, break through in the north and invade Italia, sack the city, slaughter the aristocracy, proclaim one of their kings as monarch of Roma. While off in the west the Vandals or some other tribe of that ilk lay claim to the rich provinces of Gallia and Hispania, which now become independent kingdoms, and the Empire is dissolved.

"The best and in fact only hope," Faustus had heard the Imperial Chancellor Licinius Obsequens say a month before, "is the royal marriage. Justinianus, for the sake of saving his brother-in-law's throne but also not wanting a pack of unruly barbarian kingdoms springing up along his own borders where the Western Empire used to be, sends an army to back up ours, and with the help of a few competent Greek generals the Goths finally get taken care of. But even that solution solves nothing for us. One can easily see one of Justinianus's generals offering to stay around as an 'adviser' to our young emperor Heraclius, and next thing you know Heraclius turns up poisoned and the general lets it be known that he will graciously accept the Senate's invitation to take the throne, and from that point on the Western Empire comes completely under the dominance of the East, all our tax money starts to flow toward Constantinopolis, and Justinianus rules the world."

Our best and in fact only hope. I really should slash my wrists, Faustus thought. Make a rational exit in the face of insuperable circumstances, as many a Roman hero has done before me. Certainly there is ample precedent. He thought of Lucan, who calmly recited his own poetry as he died. Petronius Arbiter, who did the same. Cocceius Nerva, who starved himself to death to show his distaste for the doings of Tiberius. "The foulest death," said Seneca, "is preferable to the fairest slavery." Very true; but perhaps I am not a true Roman hero.

He rose from the bath. Two slaves rushed to cover him with soft towels. "Send in the Numidian girl," he said, heading for the bedchamber.

"We will enter," Danielus bar-Heap explained, "by way of the gateway of Titus Gallius, which is the most famous opening into the Underworld. There are many other entrances, but this is the most impressive."

It was mid-morning: early in the day, perhaps, for going down below, certainly early in the day for the hard-living Prince Maximilianus to be up and about at all. But Faustus wanted to embark on the excursion as early as possible. Keeping the ambassador amused was his highest priority now.

The Hebrew had very quickly taken charge of the enterprise, doing all of the planning and most of the talking. He was one of the prince's most cherished companions. Faustus had met him more than once before: a big deep-voiced square-shouldered man, with jutting cheekbones and a great triangular beak of a nose, who wore his dark, almost blue-black hair in closely braided ringlets. Though it had been for many years the fashion for men to go clean-shaven in Roma, bar-Heap sported a conspicuous beard, thick and dense, that clung in tight coils to his jaws and chin. Instead of a toga he was clad in a knee-length tunic of rough white linen that was inscribed along its margins with bold lightning-bolt patterns done in bright green thread.

Ambassador Menandros, Easterner though he was, had apparently never met a Hebrew before, and needed to have bar-Heap explained to him. "They are a small tribe of desert folk who settled in Aegyptus long ago," Faustus told him. "Scatterings of them live all over the Empire by now. I dare say you would find a few in Constantinopolis. They are shrewd, determined, rather argumentative people, who don't always have the highest respect for the law, except for the laws of their own tribe, by which they abide under all circumstances in the most fanatic way. I understand they have no belief in the gods, for instance, and only the most grudging allegiance to the emperor."

"No belief in the gods?" said Menandros. "None at all?"

"Not that I can see," said Faustus.

"Well, they do have some god of their own," Maximilianus put in. "But no one may ever see him, and they make no statues of him, and he has laid down a whole lot of absurd laws about what they can eat, and so forth. Bar-Heap will probably tell you all the details, if you ask him. Or perhaps he won't. Like all his kind, he's a prickly, unpredictable sort."

Faustus had advised the ambassador that it would be best if they dressed simply for the outing, nothing that might indicate their rank. Menandros's wardrobe, of course, ran largely to luxurious silken robes and other such Eastern splendiferousness, but Faustus had provided a plain woolen toga for him that had no stripes of rank on it. Menandros appeared to know how to drape the garment properly around himself. Maximilianus Caesar, who as the son of the reigning emperor was entitled to wear a toga bedecked with a purple stripe and strands of golden thread, wore an unmarked one also. So did Faustus, although, since he too was the descendant of an emperor, he was permitted the purple stripe as well. Even so, no one down below was likely to mistake them for anything other than what they were, Romans of the highest class. But it was never a good idea to flaunt aristocratic airs too ostentatiously in the subterranean world of Roma.

The entrance that the Hebrew had chosen for them was at the edge of the teeming quarter known as the Subura, which lay east of the Forum in the valley between the Viminal and Esquiline Hills. Here, in a district marked by stench and squalor and deafening hubbub, where the common folk of Roma lived jammed elbow to elbow in shoddy buildings four and five stories high and screeching carts proceeded with much difficulty through narrow, winding streets, the emperor Titus Gallius had begun carving, about the year 980, an underground refuge in which the citizens of Roma could take shelter if the unruly Goths, then massing in the north, should break through Roma's defenses and enter the city.

The Goths, as it happened, were routed long before they got anywhere near the capital. But by then Titus Gallius had built a complex network of passageways under the Subura, and he and his successors went on enlarging it for decades, sending tentacles out in all directions, creating linkages to the existing labyrinthine chain of underground galleries and tunnels and chambers that Romans had been constructing here and there about the city for a thousand years.

And by now that Underworld was a city beneath the city, an entity unto itself down there in the dank and humid darkness. The portals of Titus Gallius lay before them, two ornate stone arches like the gaping jaws of a giant mouth, rising in the middle of the street where Imperial forces centuries ago had cleared away a block of ancient hovels on both sides to make room for the entrance plaza. The opening into the Underground was wide enough to allow three wagons to pass at the same time. A ramp of well-worn brown brick led downward into the depths.

"Here are your lanterns," bar-Heap said, lighting them and handing them around. "Remember to hold them high, to keep them from going out. The air is heavier down by your knees and will smother the flame."

As they embarked on the ramp the Caesar took the position at the front of the group; Faustus positioned himself next to the Greek; bar-Heap brought up the rear. Menandros had been taken aback to learn that they would be traveling by foot, but Faustus had explained that using porter-born litters would be inconvenient in the crowded world below. They would not even be accompanied by servants. The Greek seemed delighted to hear that. He was truly slumming today, that was clear. He wanted to travel through the Underworld as an ordinary Roman would, to get right down into all its muck and filth and danger.

Even this early in the day the ramp was crowded, both in the upward and downward directions, a quick, jostling throng. Ahead, all was cloaked in a palpable gloom. Going into the Underworld had always seemed to Faustus like entering the lair of some enormous creature. He was enveloped once again now by the thick, fierce darkness, cool, spicy. He savored its embrace. How often had he and Caesar entered here in search of a night's strange entertainment, and how many times they had found it!

Quickly his eyes began to adapt to the dim murky gleam of the lanterns. By the dull light of distant torches he could see the long ranges of far-off vaults running off on every side. The descent had quickly leveled out into the broad vestibule. Gusts of fetid underground air blew toward them, bearing a host of odors: smoke, sweat, mildew, the smell of animal bodies. It was very busy here, long lines of people and beasts of burden coming and going out of a dozen directions. The wide avenue known as the Via Subterranea stretched before them, and a myriad narrower subsidiary passages branched off to right and left. Faustus saw once more the familiar piers and arches and bays, the curving walls of warm golden brick, the heavy rock-hewn pillars and the innumerable alcoves behind them. At once the darkness of this shadowy world seemed less oppressive.

He glanced down at the Greek. Menandros's soft features were alive with excitement. His nostrils were quivering, his lips were drawn back. His expression was like that of a small child who was being taken to the gladiatorial games for the first time. He almost seemed like a child among the three tall men, too, a flimsy, diminutive figure alongside long-limbed Maximilianus and sturdy, deep-chested bar-Heap and fleshy, bulky Faustus.

"What is that?" Menandros asked, pointing to the enormous marble relief of a bearded head, cemented into the wall just ahead of them. From above came a spike of light from one of the openings that pierced the vaulted roof, admitting a white beam that lit up the carved features with an eerie nimbus.

"He is a god," said bar-Heap from behind, with a tincture of contempt in his voice. "An emperor put him up there, many years ago. Perhaps he is one of yours, or perhaps one from Syria. We call him Jupiter of the Caverns." The Hebrew raised his lantern far over his head to provide an additional burst of illumination for that powerful profile, the great staring eye, the huge all-hearing ear, the ominously parted lips, the massive coiling stone beard thicker even than his own. Everything above the eye was gone, and below the beard there was nothing also: it was a single colossal fragment that looked unthinkably ancient, a brooding relic of some great former age. "Hail, Jupiter!" bar-Heap said in a resonant tone, and laughed. But Menandros paused to examine the immense somber face, and to take note of the marble altar, worn smooth by adoring hands and luminous in the reflected light of candles mounted along its rim, just below it. The charred bones of sacrifices, recent ones, lay in a niche in its side.

Maximilianus beckoned him impatiently onward with quick imperious gestures. "This is only the beginning," the Caesar said. "We have many miles ahead of us."

"Yes. Yes, of course," said the Greek. "But still—it is so new to me, it is so strange—"

After they had gone some two hundred paces down the Via Subterranea Maximilianus made a sharp left turn into a curving passage where cold damp came stealing down the walls in a steady drip, forming pools beneath their feet. The air had a moist, choking mustiness to it.

It seemed less crowded here. At least there was less foot traffic than in the main avenue. The overhead light-shafts were spaced much farther apart. Fewer torches could be seen ahead. But out of the darkness came unsettling sounds, harsh laughter and blurred incomprehensible whispers and giddy murmurs in unknown tongues and the occasional high, sharp shriek. There were strong odors, too, those of meat roasting over smoky fires, cauliflower stew, tubs of hot peppery broth, fried fish. This was no city of the dead, however dark and grim it might look: it was bursting with secret life, roaring with it, this hidden frenetic underground world. Everywhere around, in chambers and vaults cut from the living rock, an abundance of events was going forward, Faustus knew: the sale of enchantments and the casting of spells, business deals both licit and illicit, the performance of the religious rites of a hundred cults, carnal acts of every kind.

"Where are we now?" Menandros asked.

"These are the grottos of Titus Gallius," said Caesar. "One of the busiest sectors—a place of general activities, very hard to characterize. One may see anything here, and rarely the same thing twice."

They went from chamber to chamber, following the low-ceilinged winding path that threaded everything together. It was Maximilianus, still, who led the way, hot-eyed now, almost frenzied, pulling them all behind him in his wake, often faster than Menandros wanted to go. Faustus and the Hebrew went along obligingly. This behavior of Caesar's was nothing new to them. It was almost as if some fit came over him when he was here in these tangled grottos, driving him on from one sight to the next. Faustus had seen this happen many times before down here, the bursting forth of this restless furious hunger of the Caesar's for novelty, this raging inexhaustible curiosity of his.

It was the curse of an idle life, Faustus thought, the poignant anguish of an emperor's superfluous younger son, vexed by the endless torment of his own uselessness, the mocking powerlessness within great power that was the only thing that his high birth had brought him. It was as if the greatest challenge that Maximilianus faced was the boredom of his own gilded existence, and in the Underworld he warded off that challenge through this quest for the ultimate and the impossible. The Hebrew was a necessary facilitator for this: more often than not it took a quick word from bar-Heap, not always speaking Latin, to gain admittance for them to some sector of the caverns normally closed to the uninvited.

Here, under an array of blazing sconces that filled the air with black smoke, lights that were never extinguished in this place where no distinction was made between night and day, was a marketplace where strange delicacies were being sold—the tongues of nightingales and flamingos, lamprey spleen, camel heels, bright yellow cockscombs, parrot heads, the livers of pikes, the brains of pheasants and peacocks, the ears of dormice, the eggs of pelicans, bizarre things from every corner of the Empire, everything heaped in big meaty mounds on silver trays. Menandros, that cosmopolitan Greek, stared in wonder like any provincial bumpkin. "Do Romans dine on such things every day?" he asked, and Caesar, smiling that opaque Etruscan smile of his, assured him that they constantly did, not only at the Imperial table but everywhere in Roma, even in the humblest houses, and promised him a meal of nightingales' tongues and peacock brains at the earliest opportunity.

And here was a noisy plaza filled with clowns, jugglers, acrobats, sword-swallowers, fire-eaters, tightrope-walkers, and performers of a dozen other kinds, with snarling barkers loudly calling out the praises of the acts that employed them. Maximilianus tossed silver coins freely to them, and at his urging Menandros did the same. Beyond it was a colonnaded hallway in which a freak show was being offered: hunchbacks and dwarfs, three simpering pinheads in elaborate scarlet livery, a man who looked like a living skeleton, another who must have been nearly ten feet high. "The one with the ostrich head is no longer here," said bar-Heap, obviously disappointed. "And also the girl with three eyes, and the twins joined at the waist." Here, too, they distributed coins liberally, all but bar-Heap, who kept the strings of his purse drawn tight.

"Do you know, Faustus, who is the greatest freak and monster of them all?" asked Maximilianus, under his breath, as they walked along. And when Faustus remained silent the prince offered an answer to his own question that Faustus had not anticipated: "It is the emperor, my friend, for he stands apart from all other men, distinct, unique, forever isolated from all honesty and love, from normal feeling of any sort. He is a grotesque thing, an emperor is. There is no monster so pitiable on this earth as an emperor, Faustus." The Caesar, gripping the fleshiest part of Faustus's arm with iron force, gave him such a queer look of fury and anguish that Faustus was astounded by its intensity. This was a side of his friend he had never seen before. But then Maximilianus grinned and jabbed him lightheartedly in the ribs, and winked as if to take the sting out of his words.

Farther on was a row of apothecary stalls cluttered one upon the next in a series of narrow alcoves that were part of what looked like an abandoned temple. Lamps were burning before each one. These dealers in medicines offered such things as the bile of bulls and hyenas, the sloughed-off skins of snakes, the webs of spiders, the dung of elephants. "What is this?" the Greek asked, pointing into a glass vial that contained some fine gray powder, and bar-Heap, after making inquiry, reported that it was the excrement of Sicilian doves, much valued in treating tumors of the leg and many other maladies. Another booth sold only rare aromatic barks from the trees of India; another, small disks made of rare red clay from the isle of Lemnos, stamped with the sacred seal of Diana and reputed to cure the bite of mad dogs and the effects of the most lethal poisons. "And this man here," said Maximilianus grandly at the next stall, "purveys nothing but theriac, the universal antidote, potent even for leprosy. It is made mainly from the flesh of vipers steeped in wine, I think, but there are other ingredients, secret ones, and even if we put him to the torture he would not reveal them." And, with a wink to the drug's purveyor, a one-eyed hawk-faced old Aegyptian, "Eh, Ptolemaios, is that not so? Not even if we put you to the torture?"

"It will not come to that, I hope, Caesar," the man replied.

"So they know you here?" Menandros asked, when they had moved onward.

"Some do. This one has several times brought his wares to the palace to treat my ailing father."

"Ah," the Greek said. "Your ailing father, yes. All the world prays for his swift recovery."

Maximilianus nodded casually, as though Menandros had expressed nothing more than a wish for fair weather on the next day.

Faustus felt troubled by the strangeness of the Caesar's mood. He knew Maximilianus to be an unpredictable man who veered constantly between taut control and wild abandon, but it was mere courtesy to offer a grateful word for such an expression of sympathy, and yet he had been unable to bring himself to do it. What, he wondered, does the ambassador think of this strange prince? Or does he think nothing at all, except that this is what one can expect the younger son of a Roman emperor to be like?

There were no clocks in this subterranean world, nor was there any clue in this sunless place to the hour available from the skies, but Faustus's belly was telling him the time quite unmistakably now. "Shall we go above to eat," he asked Menandros, "or would you prefer to dine down here?"

"Oh, down here, by all means," said the Greek. "I'm not at all ready to go above!"

They ate at a torchlit tavern two galleries over from the arcade of the apothecaries, sitting cheek by jowl with scores of garlicky commoners on rough wooden benches: a meal of meat stewed in a spicy sauce made from fermented fish, fruits steeped in honey and vinegar, harsh acrid wine not much unlike vinegar itself. Menandros seemed to love it. He must never have encountered such indelicate delicacies before, and he ate and drank with ravenous appetite. The effects of this indulgence showed quickly on him: the sweat-shiny brow, the ruddy cheeks, the glazing eyes. Maximilianus, too, allowed himself course after course, washing his food down with awesome quantities of the dreadful wine; but, then, Maximilianus adored this stuff and never knew when to stop when wine of any kind was within reach. Faustus, not a man of great moderation himself, who loved drinking to excess, loved the dizzy float upward that too much wine brought on, the severing of his soaring mind from his ever more gross and leaden flesh, had to force himself to swallow it. But eventually he took to drinking most of each new pitcher as fast as he could, regardless of the taste, in order to keep the Caesar from overindulging. He gave much of the rest to the stolid, evidently bottomless bar-Heap, for he knew what perils were possible if the prince, far gone in drunkenness, should get himself into some foolish brawl down here. He could easily imagine bringing Maximilianus back on a board from the caverns some day, with his royal gut slashed from one side to the other and his body already stiffening. If that happened the best he could hope for himself would be to spend the remainder of his own life in brutal exile in some dismal Teutonic outpost.

When they went onward finally, somewhere late in the afternoon, a subtle change of balance had taken place in the group. Maximilianus, either because he had suddenly grown bored or because he had eaten too much, seemed to lose interest in the expedition. No longer did he sprint ahead, beckoning them on along from corridor to corridor as though racing some unseen opponent from one place to the next. Now it was Menandros, fueled by his heavy input of wine, who seized command, displaying now a hunger to see it all even more powerful than the prince's had been, and rushing them along through the subterranean city. Not knowing any of the routes, he made random turns, taking them now into pitch-black cul-de-sacs, now to the edges of dizzying abysses where long many-runged ladders led to spiraling successions of lower levels, now to chambers with painted walls where rows of cackling madwomen sat in throne-like niches demanding alms.

Most of the time Maximilianus did not seem to be able to identify the places into which Menandros had led them, or did not care to say. It became the task of bar-Heap, whose mastery of the underground city seemed total, to explain what they were seeing. “This place is the underground arena,” the Hebrew said, as they peered into a black hole that seemed to stretch for many leagues. “The games are held here at the midnight hour, and all contests are to the death.” They came soon afterward to a gleaming marble façade and a grand doorway leading to some interior chamber: the Temple of Jupiter Imperator, bar-Heap explained. That was the cult established by the emperor Gaius Martius in the hope, not entirely realized, of identifying the father of the gods with the head of the state in the eyes of the common people, who otherwise might wander off into some kind of alien religious belief that could weaken their loyalty to the state. “And this,” said bar-Heap at an adjacent temple flush against the side of Jupiter's, “is the House of Cybele, where they worship the Great Mother.”

“We have that cult in the East as well,” said Menandros, and halted to examine with a connoisseur's eye the fanciful mosaic ornamentation, row upon row of patterned tiles, red and blue and orange and green and gold, that proclaimed this place the dwelling of the full-breasted goddess. "How fine this is," the Greek said, "to build such a wonder underground, where it can barely be seen except by this dirty torchlight, and not well even then. How bold! How extravagant!"

"It is a very wealthy creed, Cybele's," said Maximilianus, nudging Faustus broadly as though to remind him of the stolen opals of the goddess that would be his gift to his brother's Constantinopolitan bride.

Menandros drew them tirelessly on through the dark labyrinth—past bubbling fountains and silent burial-chambers and frescoed cult-halls and bustling marketplaces, and then through a slit-like opening in the wall that took them into a huge, empty space from which a multitude of dusty unmarked corridors radiated, and down one and then another of those, until, in a place of awkwardly narrow passages, even bar-Heap seemed uncertain of where they were. A frown furrowed the Hebrew's forehead. Faustus, who by this time was feeling about ready to drop from fatigue, began to worry too. Suddenly there was no one else around. The only sounds here were the sounds of their own echoing footsteps. Everyone had heard tales of people roaming the subterranean world who had taken injudicious turns and found themselves irretrievably lost in mazes built in ancient days to delude possible invaders, bewilderingly intricate webworks of anarchic design whose outlets were essentially unfindable and from which the only escape was through starvation. A sad fate for the little Greek emissary and the dashing, venturesome royal prince, Faustus thought. A sad fate for Faustus, too.

But this was not a maze of that sort. Four sharp bends, a brief climb by ladder, a left turn, and they were back on the Via Subterranea, somehow, though no doubt very far from the point where they had entered the underground metropolis that morning. The vaulted ceiling was pointed here, and inlaid with rows of coral-colored breccia. A procession of chanting priests was coming toward them, gaunt men whose faces were smeared with rouge and whose eyesockets were painted brightly in rings of yellow and green. They wore white tunics crisscrossed with narrow purple stripes and towering saffron-colored caps that bore the emblem of a single glaring eye at their summits. Energetically they flogged one another with whips of knotted woolen yarn studded with the knucklebones of sheep as they danced along, and cried out in harsh, jabbering rhythmic tones, uttering prayers in some foreign tongue.

"Eunuchs, all of them," said bar-Heap in disgust. "Worshippers of Dionysus. Step aside, or they'll bowl you over, for they yield place to no one when they march like this."

Close behind the priests came a procession of deformed clowns, squinting hunchbacked men who also were carrying whips, but only pretending to use them on each other. Maximilianus flung them a handful of coins, and Menandros did the same, and they broke formation at once, scrabbling enthusiastically in the dimness to scoop them up. On the far side of them the Hebrew pointed out a chamber that he identified as a chapel of Priapus, and Menandros was all for investigating it; but this time Maximilianus said swiftly, "I think that is for another day, your excellence. One should be in fresh condition for such amusements, and you must be tired now, after this long first journey through the netherworld."

The ambassador looked unhappy. Faustus wondered whose will would prevail: that of the visiting diplomat, whose whims ought to be respected, or of the emperor's son, who did not expect to be gainsaid. But after a moment's hesitation Menandros agreed that it was time to go back above. Perhaps he saw the wisdom of checking his voracious curiosity for a little while, or else simply that of yielding to the prince's request.

"There is an exit ramp over there," bar-Heap said, pointing to his right. With surprising speed they emerged into the open. Night had fallen. The sweet cool air seemed, as ever upon emerging, a thousand times fresher and more nourishing than that of the world below. Faustus was amused to see that they were not far from the Baths of Constantinus, only a few hundred yards from where they had gone in, although his legs were aching fiercely, as though he had covered many leagues that day. They must have traveled in an enormous circle, he decided.

He yearned for his own bath, and a decent dinner, and a massage afterward and the Numidian girl.

Maximilianus, with an Imperial prince's casual arrogance, hailed a passing litter that bore Senatorial markings, and requisitioned its use for his own purposes. Its occupant, a balding man whom Faustus recognized by face but could not name, hastened to comply, scuttling away into the night without protest. Faustus and Menandros and the Caesar clambered aboard, while the Hebrew, with no more farewell than an irreverent offhand wave, vanished into the darkness of the streets.

There was no message waiting at home for Faustus to tell him that Prince Heraclius was heading back to the city. He had been hoping for such news. Tomorrow would be another exhausting day spent underground, then.

He slept badly, though the little Numidian did her best to soothe his nerves.

This time they entered the Underworld farther to the west, between the column of Marcus Aurelius and the Temple of Isis and Sarapis. That was, bar-Heap said, the quickest way to reach the marketplace of the sorcerers, which Menandros had some particular interest in seeing.

Diligent guide that he was, the Hebrew showed them all the notable landmarks along the way: the Whispering Gallery, where even the faintest of sounds traveled enormous distances, and the Baths of Pluto, a series of steaming thermal pools that gave off a foul sulphurous reek but which nevertheless abounded in patrons even here at midday, and the River Styx nearby it, the black subterranean stream that followed a rambling course through the underground city until it emerged into the Tiber just upstream from the great sewer of the Cloaca Maxima.

"Truly, the Styx?" Menandros asked, with a credulity Faustus had not expected of him.

"We call it that," said bar-Heap. "Because it is the river of our Underworld, you see. But the true one is somewhere in your own eastern realm, I think. Here—we must turn—"

A jagged, irregularly oval aperture in the passageway wall proved to be the entrance to the great hall that served as the sorcerers' marketplace. Originally, so they said, it had been intended as a storage vault for the Imperial chariots, to keep them from being seized by invading barbarians. When such precautions had turned out to be unnecessary, the big room had been taken over by a swarm of sorcerers, who divided it by rows of pumice-clad arches into a collection of small low-walled chambers. An octagonal light-well, high overhead in the very center of the roof of the hall, allowed pale streams of sunlight to filter down from the street above, but most of the marketplace's illumination came from the smoky braziers in front of each stall. These, whether by some enchantment or mere technical skill, all burned with gaudy many-hued flames, and dancing strands of violet and pale crimson and cobalt blue and brilliant emerald mingled with the more usual reds and yellows of a charcoal fire.

The roar of commerce rose up on every side. Each of the sorcerers' stalls had its barker, crying the merits of his master's wares. Scarcely had the ambassador Menandros entered the room than one of these, a fat, sweaty-faced man wearing a brocaded robe of Syrian style, spied him as a likely mark, beckoning him inward with both arms while calling out, "Eh, there, you dear little fellow: what about a love spell today, an excellent inflamer, the finest of its kind?"

Menandros indicated interest. The barker said, "Come, then, let me show you this splendid wizardry! It attracts men to women, women to men, and makes virgins rush out of their homes to find lovers!" He reached behind him, snatched up a rolled parchment scroll, and waved it in front of Menandros's nose. "Here, friend, here! You take a pure papyrus and write on it, with the blood of an ass, the magical words contained on this. Then you put in a hair of the woman you desire, or a snip of her clothing, or a bit of her bedsheet—acquire it however you may. And then you smear the papyrus with a bit of vinegar gum, and stick it to the wall of her house, and you will marvel! But watch that you are not struck yourself, or you may find yourself bound by the chains of love to some passing drover, or to his donkey, perhaps, or even worse! Three sestertii! Three!"

"If infallible love is to be had so cheaply," Maximilianus said to the man, "why is it that languishing lovers hurl themselves into the river every day of the week?"

"And also why is it that the whorehouses are kept so busy," added Faustus, "when for three brass coins anyone can have the woman of his dreams?"

"Or the man," said Menandros. "For this charm will work both ways, so he tells us."

"Or on a donkey," put in Danielus bar-Heap, and they laughed and passed onward.

Nearby, a spell of invisibility was for sale, at a price of two silver denarii. "It is the simplest thing," insisted the barker, a small lean man tight as a coiled spring, whose swarthy sharp-chinned face was marked by the scars of some ancient knife-fight. "Take a night-owl's eye and a ball of the dung of the beetles of Aegyptus and the oil of an unripe olive and grind them all together until smooth, and smear your whole body with it, and then go to the nearest shrine of the lord Apollo by dawn's first light and utter the prayer that this parchment will give you. And you will be invisible to all eyes until sunset, and can go unnoticed among the ladies at their baths, or slip into the palace of the emperor and help yourself to delicacies from his table, or fill your purse with gold from the moneychangers' tables. Two silver denarii, only!"

"Quite reasonable, for a day's invisibility," Menandros said. "I'll have it, for my master's delight." And reached for his purse; but the Caesar, catching him by the wrist, warned him never to accept the quoted first price in a place like this. Menandros shrugged, as though to point out that the price asked was only a trifle, after all. But to the Caesar Maximilianus there was an issue of principle here. He invoked the aid of bar-Heap, who quickly bargained the fee down to four copper dupondii, and, since Menandros did not have coins as small as that in his purse, it was Faustus who handed over the price.

"You have done well," the barker said, giving the Greek his bit of parchment. Menandros, turning away, opened it. "The letters are Greek," he said.

Maximilianus nodded. "Yes. Most of this trash is set out in Greek. It is the language of magic, here."

"The letters are Greek," said Menandros, "but not the words. Listen." And he read out in a rolling resonant tone: " 'BORKE PHOIOUR IO ZIZIA APARXEOUCH THYTHE LAILAM AAAAAA IIII OOOO IEO IEO IEO.' " Then he looked up from the scroll. "And there are three more lines, of much the same sort. What do you make of that, my friends?"

"I think it is well that you didn't read the rest," said Faustus, "or you might have disappeared right before our noses."

"Not without employing the beetle-dung and the owl's eye and the rest," bar-Heap observed. "Nor is that dawn's first light coming down that shaft, even if you would pretend that this is Apollo's temple."

" 'IO IO O PHRIXRIZO EOA,' " Menandros read, and giggled in pleasure, and rolled the scroll and put it in his purse.

It did not appear likely to Faustus that the Greek was a believer in this nonsense, as his earlier eagerness to visit this marketplace had led him to suspect. No. Doubtless he was merely looking for quaint souvenirs to bring back to his emperor in Constantinopolis, entertaining examples of modern-day Roman gullibility; for Menandros must surely have noticed by this time an important truth about this room, which was that nearly all the sorcerers and their salesmen were citizens of the Eastern half of the empire, which had a reputation for magic going back to the distant days of the Pharaohs and the kings of Babylon, while the customers—and there were plenty of them—all were Romans of the West. It was an oily place, the Eastern Empire. All the mercantile skills had been invented there. The East's roots went deep down into antiquity, into a time long before Roma itself ever was, and one needed to keep a wary eye out in any dealings with its citizens.

Menandros was an enthusiastic buyer. Was stuff like this no longer available in the other Empire? Surely it must be, at least in the provinces. He was just trying to collect evidence of Roman silliness, yes. Using bar-Heap to beat the prices down for him, he went from booth to booth, gathering up the merchandise. He acquired instructions for fashioning a ring of power that would permit one to get whatever one asks from anybody, or to calm the anger of masters and kings. He bought a charm to induce wakefulness, and another to bring on sleep. He got a lengthy scroll that offered a whole catalog of mighty mysteries, and gleefully read from it to them: " 'You will see the doors thrown open, and seven virgins coming from deep within, dressed in linen garments, and with the faces of asps. They are called the Fates of Heaven, and wield golden wands. When you see them, greet them in this manner—' " He found a spell that necromancers could use to keep skulls from speaking out of turn while their owners were using them in the casting of spells; he found one that would summon the Headless One who had created earth and heaven, the mighty Osoronnophris, and conjure Him to expel demons from a sufferer's body; he found one that would bring back lost or stolen property; he went back to the first booth and bought the infallible love potion, for a fraction of the original asking price; and, finally, picked up one that would cause one's fellow drinkers at a drinking party to think that they had grown the snouts of apes.

At last, well satisfied with his purchases, Menandros said he was willing to move on. At the far end of the hall, beyond the territory of the peddlers of spells, they paused at the domain of the soothsayers and augurs. "For a copper or two," Faustus told the Greek, "they will look at the palm of your hand, or the pattern of lines on your forehead, and tell you your future. For a higher price they will examine the entrails of chickens or the liver of a sheep, and tell you your *true* future. Or even the future of the Empire itself."

Menandros looked astonished. "The future of the Empire? Common diviners in a public marketplace offer prophecies of a sort like that? I'd think only the Imperial augurs would deal in such news, and only for the emperor's ear."

"The Imperial augurs provide more reliable information, I suppose," said Faustus. "But this is Roma, where everything is for sale to anyone." He looked down the row, and saw the one who had claimed new knowledge of the Sybilline prophecies and foretold the imminent end of the Empire—an old man, unmistakably Roman, not a Greek or any other kind of foreigner, with faded blue eyes and a lengthy, wispy white beard. "Over there is one of the most audacious of our seers, for instance," Faustus said, pointing. "For a fee he will tell you that our time of Empire is nearly over, that a year is coming soon when the seven planets will meet at Capricorn and the entire universe will be consumed by fire."

"The great *ekpyrosis,*" Menandros said. "We have the same prophecy. What does he base his calculations on, I wonder?"

"What does it matter?" cried Maximilianus, in a burst of sudden unconcealed rage. "It is all foolishness!"

"Perhaps so," Faustus said gently. And, to Menandros, whose curiosity about the old man and his apocalyptic predictions still was apparent: "It has something to do with the old tale of King Romulus and the twelve eagles that passed overhead on the day he and his brother Remus fought over the proper location for the city of Roma."

"They were twelve vultures, I thought," said bar-Heap.

Faustus shook his head. "No. Eagles, they were. And the prophecy of the Sibyl is that Roma will endure for twelve Great Years of a hundred years each, one for each of Romulus's eagles, and one century more beyond that. This is the year 1282 since the founding. So we have eighteen years left, says the long-bearded one over there."

"This is all atrocious foolishness," said Maximilianus again, his eyes blazing.

"May we speak with this man a moment, even so?" Menandros asked.

The Caesar most plainly did not want to go near him. But his guest's mild request could hardly be refused. Faustus saw Maximilianus struggling with his anger as they walked toward the soothsayer's booth, and with some effort putting it aside. "Here is a visitor to our city," said Maximilianus to the old man in a clenched voice, "who wants to hear what you've to say concerning the impending fiery end of Roma. Name your price and tell him your fables."

But the soothsayer shrank back, trembling in fear. "No, Caesar. I pray you, let me be!"

"You recognize me, do you?"

"Who would not recognize the emperor's son? Especially one whose profession it is to pierce all veils."

"You've pierced mine, certainly. But why do I frighten you so? I mean you no harm. Come, man, my friend here is a Greek from Justianianus's court, full of questions for you about the terrible doom that shortly will be heading our way. Speak your piece, will you?" Maximilianus pulled out his purse and drew a shining gold piece from it. "A fine newly minted aureus, is that enough to unseal your lips? Two? Three?"

It was a fortune. But the man seemed paralyzed with terror. He moved back in his booth, shivering, now, almost on the verge of collapse. The blood had drained from his face and his pale blue eyes were bulging and rigid. It was asking too much of him, Faustus supposed, to be compelled to speak of the approaching destruction of the world to the emperor's actual son.

"Enough," Faustus murmured. "You'll scare the poor creature to death, Maximilianus."

But the Caesar was bubbling with fury. "No! Here's gold for him! Let him speak! Let him speak!"

"Caesar, *I* will speak to you, if you like," said a high-pitched, sharp-edged voice from behind them. "And will tell you such things as are sure to please your ears."

It was another soothsayer, a ratty little squint-faced man in a tattered yellow tunic, who now made so bold as to pluck at the edge of Maximilianus's toga. He had cast an augury for Maximilianus just now upon seeing the Caesar's entry into the marketplace, he said, and would not even ask a fee for it. No, not so much as two coppers for the news he had to impart. Not even one.

"Not interested," Maximilianus said brusquely, and turned away.

But the little diviner would not accept the rebuff. With frantic squirrelly energy he ran around Maximilianus's side to face him again and said, with the reckless daring of the utterly insignificant confronting the extremely grand, "I threw the bones, Caesar, and they showed me your future. It is a glorious one. You will be one of Roma's greatest heroes! Men will sing your praises for centuries to come."

Instantly a bright blaze of fury lit Maximilianus's entire countenance. Faustus had never seen the prince so incensed. "Do you dare to mock me to my face?" the Caesar demanded, his voice so thick with wrath that he could barely get the words out. His right arm quivered and jerked as though he were struggling to keep it from lashing out in rage. "A hero, you say! A hero! A *hero!*" If the little man had spat in his face it could not have maddened him more.

But the soothsayer persisted. "Yes, my lord, a great general, who will shatter the barbarian armies like so many empty husks! You will march against them at the head of a mighty force not long after you become emperor, and—"

That was too much for the prince. "Emperor, too!" Maximilianus bellowed, and in that same moment struck out wildly at the man, a fierce backhanded blow that sent him reeling against the bench where the other soothsayer, the old bearded one, was still cowering. Then, stepping forward, Maximilianus caught the little man by the shoulder and slapped him again and again, back, forth, back, forth, knocking his head from side to side until blood poured from his mouth and nose and his eyes began to glaze over. Faustus, frozen at first in sheer amazement, moved in after a time to intervene. "Maximilianus!" he said, trying to catch the Caesar's flailing arm. "My lord—I beg you—it is not right, my lord—"

He signaled to bar-Heap, and the Hebrew caught Maximilianus's other arm. Together they pulled him back.

There was sudden silence in the hall. The sorcerers and their employees had ceased their work and were staring in astonishment and horror, as was Menandros.

The ragged little soothsayer, sprawling now in a kind of daze against the bench, spat out a tooth and said, in a kind of desperate defiance, "Even so, your majesty, it is the truth: Emperor."

It was all that Faustus and the Hebrew could manage to get the prince away from there without his doing further damage.

This capacity for wild rage was an aspect of Maximilianus that Faustus had never seen. The Caesar took nothing seriously. The world was a great joke to him. He had always let it be known that he cared for nothing and no one, not even himself. He was too cynical and wanton of spirit, too flighty, too indifferent to anything of any real importance, ever to muster the kind of involvement with events that true anger required. Then why had the soothsayer's words upset him so? His fury had been out of all proportion to the offense, if offense there had been. The man was merely trying to flatter. Here is a royal prince come among us: very well, tell him he will be a great hero, tell him even that he will be emperor some day. The second of those, at least, was not impossible. Heraclius, who soon would have the throne, might well die childless, and they would have no choice but to ask his brother to ascend to power, however little Maximilianus himself might care for the idea.

Saying that Maximilianus would become a great hero, though: that must have been what stung him so, Faustus thought. Doubtless he did not regard himself as having a single iota of the stuff of heroes in him, whatever a flattering soothsayer might choose to say. And must believe also that all Roma perceived him not as a handsome young prince who might yet achieve great things but only as the idle wencher and gambler and dissipated profligate rogue that he was in his own eyes. And so he was able to interpret the soothsayer's words not as flattery but merely as mockery of the most inflammatory kind.

"We should quickly find ourselves a wine-shop, I think," Faustus said. "Some wine will cool your overheated blood, my lord."

Indeed the wine, vile though it was, calmed Maximilianus rapidly, and soon he was laughing and shaking his head over the impudence of the ratty little man. "A hero of the realm! Me! And emperor, too? Was there ever a soothsayer so far from the truth in his auguries?"

"If they are all like that one," said bar-Heap, "then I think there's no need to fear the coming fiery destruction of the universe, either. These men are clowns, or worse. All they provide is amusement for fools."

"A useful function in the world, I would say," Menandros observed. "There are so many fools, and should they not have amusement too?"

Faustus said very little. The episode among the sorcerers and soothsayers had left him in a mood of uncharacteristic bleakness. He had always been a good-humored man; the Caesar prized him for the jolly companionship he offered; but his frame of mind had grown steadily more sober since the coming to Roma of this Greek ambassador, and now he felt himself ringed round with an inchoate host of despondent thoughts. It was spending so much time in this underground realm of darkness and flickering shadows, he told himself, that had done this to him. He and the prince had found only pleasure here in days gone by, but their time these two days past in these ancient tunnels, this mysterious kingdom of inexplicable noises and visitations, of invisible beings, of lurking ghosts, had made him weary and uncomfortable. This dank sunless underground world, he thought, was the true Roma, a benighted kingdom of magic and terror, a place of omens and dread.

Would the world be destroyed by flame in eighteen years, as the old man said? Probably not. In any case he doubted that he would live to see it. The universe's end might not be approaching, but surely his own was: five years, ten, at best fifteen, and he would be gone, well before the promised catastrophe, the—what had the Greek called it?—the great *ekpyrosis*.

But even if no flaming apocalypse was really in store, the Empire did seem to be crumbling. There were symptoms of disease everywhere. That the man second in line for the throne would react with such fury at the possibility that he might be called upon to serve the realm was a sign of the extent of the illness. That the barbarians might soon be battering at the gates again, only a generation after they supposedly had been put to rout forever, was another. We seem to have lost our way.

Faustus filled his cup again. He knew he was drinking too much too fast: even his capacious paunch had its limits. But the wine eased the pain. Drink, then, old Faustus. Drink. If nothing else, you can allow your body a little comfort.

Yes, he was getting old. But Roma was even older. The immensity of the city's past pressed down on him from all sides. The narrow streets, choked with dunghill-rubbish, that gave way to the great plazas and their myriad fountains with their silvery jets, and the palaces of the rich and mighty, and the statues everywhere, the obelisks, the columns taken from far-off temples, the spoils of a hundred Imperial conquests, the shrines of a hundred foreign gods, and the clean old Roma of the early Republic somewhere beneath it all: level upon level of history here, twelve centuries of it, the present continually written over the past, the city an enormous palimpsest—yes, he told himself, it has been a good long run, and perhaps, now that we have created so much past for ourselves, we have very little future, and really are wandering toward the finish, and will disappear into our own softness, our own confusion, our own fatal love of pleasure and ease.

That troubled him greatly. But why, he wondered, did he care? He was nothing but a licentious old idler himself, the companion to a licentious young one. It had been his lifelong pretense never to care about anything.

And yet, yet, he could not let himself forget that he had the blood of the prodigious Constantinus in his veins, one of the greatest emperors of all. The fate of the Empire had mattered profoundly to Constantinus: he had toiled for decades at its helm, and ultimately he had saved it from collapse by creating a new capital for it in the East, a second foundation to help carry the weight that Urbs Roma itself was no longer capable of bearing alone. Here am I, two and a quarter centuries later, and I am to my great ancestor Constantinus as a plump, sleepy old cat is to a raging lion: but I must care at least a little about the fate of the Empire to which he pledged his life. For his sake, if not particularly for my own. Otherwise, Faustus asked himself fiercely, what is the point of having the blood of an emperor in my veins?

"You've grown very quiet, old man," Maximilianus said. "Did I upset you, shouting and rioting like that back there?"

"A little. But that's over now."

"What is it, then?"

"Thinking. A pernicious pastime, which I regret." Faustus swirled his cup about and peered glumly into its depths. "Here we are," he said, "down in the bowels of the city, this weird dirty place. I have always thought that everything seems unreal here, that it is all a kind of stage-show. And yet right now it seems to me that it's far more real than anything up above. Down here, at least, there are no pretenses. It's every man for himself amidst the fantasies and grotesqueries, and no one has any illusions. We know why we are here and what we must do." Then, pointing toward the world above them: "Up there, though, folly reigns supreme. We delude ourselves into thinking that it is the world of stern reality, the world of Imperial power and Roman commercial might, but no one actually behaves as though any of it has to be taken seriously. Our heads are in the sand, like that great African bird's. The barbarians are coming, but we're doing nothing to stop them. And this time the barbarians will swallow us. They'll go roaring at last through the marble city that's sitting up there above us, looting and torching, and afterward nothing will remain of Roma but this, this dark, dank, hidden, eternally mysterious Underworld of strange gods and ghastly monstrosities. Which I suppose is the true Roma, the eternal city of the shadows."

"You're drunk," Maximilianus said.

"Am I?"

"This place down here is a mere fantasy-world, Faustus, as you are well aware. It's a place without meaning." The prince pointed upward as Faustus had just done. "The true Roma that you speak of is up there. Always was, always will be. The palaces, the temples, the Capitol, the walls. Solid, indestructible, imperishable. The eternal city, yes. And the barbarians will never swallow it. Never. *Never*."

That was a tone of voice Faustus had never heard the prince use before, either. The second unfamiliar one in less than an hour, this one hard, clear, passionate. There was, again, an odd new intensity in his eyes. Faustus had seen that strange intensity the day before, too, when the prince had spoken of emperors as freaks and monsters. It was as though something new was trying to burst free inside the Caesar these two days past, Faustus realized. And it must be getting very close to the surface now. What will happen to us all, he wondered, when it breaks loose?

He closed his own eyes a moment, nodded, smiled. Let what will come come, he thought. Whatsoever it may be.

They ended their day in the Underworld soon afterward. Maximilianus's savage outburst in the hall of the soothsayers seemed to have placed a damper on everything, even Menandros's previously insatiable desire to explore the infinite crannies of the underground caverns.

It was near sundown when Faustus reached his chambers, having promised Menandros that he would dine with him later at the ambassador's lodgings in the Severan Palace. A surprise was waiting for him. Prince Heraclius had indeed gone to his hunting lodge, not to the frontier, and the message that Faustus had sent to him there had actually reached him. The prince was even now on his way back to Roma, arriving this very evening, and wished to meet with the emissary from Justinianus as soon as possible.

Hurriedly Faustus bathed and dressed in formal costume. The Numidian girl was ready and waiting, but Faustus dismissed her, and told his equerry that he would not require her services later in the evening, either.

"A curious day," Menandros said, when Faustus arrived.

"It was, yes," said Faustus.

"Your friend the Caesar was greatly distressed by that man's talk of his becoming emperor some day. Is the idea so distasteful to him?"

"It's not something he gives any thought to at all, becoming emperor. Heraclius will be emperor. That's never been in doubt. He's the older by six years: he was well along in training for the throne when Maximilianus was born, and has always been treated by everyone as his father's successor. Maximilianus sees no future for himself in any way different from the life he leads now. He's never looked upon himself as a potential ruler."

"Yet the Senate could name either brother as emperor, is that not so?"

"The Senate could name me as emperor, if it chose. Or even you. In theory, as you surely know, there's nothing hereditary about it. In practice things are different. Heraclius's way to the throne is clear. Besides, Maximilianus doesn't *want* to be emperor. Being emperor is hard work, and Maximilianus has never worked at anything in his life. I think that's what upset him so much today, the mere thought that he somehow could be emperor, some day."

Faustus knew Menandros well enough by now to be able to detect the barely masked disdain that these words of his produced. Menandros understood what an emperor was supposed to be: a man like that severe and ruthless soldier Justinianus, who held sway from Dacia and Thrace to the borders of Persia, and from the frosty northern shores of the Pontic Sea to some point far down in torrid Africa, exerting command over everything and everyone, the whole complex crazyquilt that was the Eastern Empire, with the merest flick of an eye. Whereas here, in the ever flabbier West, which was about to ask Justinianus's help in fighting off its own long-time enemies, the reigning emperor was currently ill and invisible, the heir to the throne was so odd that he was capable of slipping out of town just as Justinianus's ambassador was arriving to discuss the very alliance the West so urgently needed, and the man second in line to the Empire cared so little for the prospect of attaining the Imperial grandeur that he would thrash someone half his size for merely daring to suggest that he might.

He sees us of the West as next to worthless, Faustus thought. And perhaps he is correct.

This was not a profitable discussion. Faustus cut it short by telling him that Prince Heraclius would return that very evening.

"Ah, then," said Menandros, "affairs must be settling down on your northern frontier. Good."

Faustus did not think it was his duty to explain that the Caesar couldn't possibly have made the round trip to the frontier and back in so few days, that in fact he had merely been away at his hunting lodge in the countryside. Heraclius would be quite capable of achieving his own trivialization without Faustus's assistance.

Instead Faustus gave orders for their dinner to be served. They had just reached the last course, the fruits and sherbets, when a messenger entered with word that Prince Heraclius was now in Roma, and awaited the presence of the ambassador from Constantinopolis in the Hall of Marcus Anastasius at the Imperial palace.

The closest part of the five-hundred-year-old string of buildings that was the Imperial compound was no more than ten minutes' walk from where they were now. But Heraclius, with his usual flair for the inappropriate gesture, had chosen for the place of audience not his own residential quarters, which were relatively nearby, but the huge, echoing chamber where the Great Council of State ordinarily met, far over on the palace's northern side at the very crest of the Palatine Hill. Faustus had two litters brought to take them up there.

The prince had boldly stationed himself on the throne-like seat at the upper end of the chamber that the emperor used during meetings of the Council. He sat there now with Imperial haughtiness, waiting in silence while Menandros undertook the endless unavoidable ambassadorial plod across the enormous room, with Faustus hulking along irritatedly behind him. For one jarring instant Faustus wondered whether the old emperor had actually, unbeknownst to him, died during the day, and the reason Heraclius was in Roma was that he had hurried back to take his father's place. But someone surely would have said something to him in that case, Faustus thought.

Menandros knew his job. He knelt before the prince and made the appropriate gesticulation. When he rose, Heraclius had risen also and was holding forth his hand, which bore an immense carnelian ring, to be kissed. Menandros kissed the prince's ring. The ambassador made a short, graceful speech expressing his greetings and the best wishes of the emperor Justinianus for the good health of his royal colleague the emperor Maximilianus, and for that of his royal son the Caesar Heraclius, and offered thanks for the hospitality that had been rendered him thus far. He gave credit warmly to Faustus but—quite shrewdly, Faustus thought—did not mention the role of Prince Maximilianus at all.

Heraclius listened impassively. He seemed jittery and remote, more so even than he ordinarily was.

Faustus had never felt any love for the Imperial heir. Heraclius was a stiff, tense person, ill at ease under the best of circumstances: a short, slight, inconsequential figure of a man with none of his younger brother's easy athleticism. He was cold-eyed, too, thin-lipped, humorless. It was hard to see him as his father's son. The emperor Maximilianus, in earlier days, had looked much the way the prince his namesake did today: a tall, slender, handsome man with glinting russet hair and smiling blue eyes. Heraclius, though, was dark-haired, where he still had hair at all, and his eyes were dark as coals, glowering under heavy brows out of his pale, expressionless face.

The meeting was inconclusive. The prince and the ambassador both understood that this first encounter was not the time to begin any discussion of the royal marriage or the proposed East-West military alliance, but even so Faustus was impressed by the sheer vacuity of the conversation. Heraclius asked if Menandros cared to attend the gladiatorial games the following week, said a sketchy thing or two about his Etruscan ancestors and their religious beliefs, of which he claimed to be a student of sorts, and spoke briefly of some idiotic Greek play that had been presented at the Odeum of Agrippa Ligurinus the week before. Of the barbarians massing at the border he said nothing at all. Of his father's grave illness, nothing. Of his hope of close friendship with Justinianus, nothing. He might just as well have been discussing the weather. Menandros gravely met immateriality with immateriality. He could do nothing else, Faustus understood. The Caesar Heraclius must be allowed to lead here.

And then, very quickly, Heraclius made an end of it. "I hope we have an opportunity to meet again very shortly," the prince said, arbitrarily terminating the visit with such suddenness that even the quick-witted Menandros was caught off guard by his blunt dismissal, and Faustus heard a tiny gasp from him. "To my regret, I will have to leave the city again tomorrow. But upon my return, at the earliest opportunity—" And he held forth his ringed hand to be kissed again.

Menandros said, when they were outside and waiting for their litters to be brought, "May we speak frankly, my friend?"

Faustus chuckled. "Let me guess. You found the Caesar to be less than engaging."

"I would use some such phrase, yes. Is he always like that?"

h, no," Faustus said. "He's ordinarily much worse. He was on his best

or for you, I'd say."

"Indeed. Very interesting. And this is to be the next emperor of the West. Word had reached us in Constantinopolis, you know, that the Caesar Heraclius was, well, not altogether charming. But—even so—I was not fully prepared—"

"Did you mind very much kissing his ring?"

"Oh, no, not at all. One expects, as an ambassador, to have to show a certain deference, at least to the emperor. And to his son as well, I suppose, if he requires it of one. No, Faustus, what I was struck by—how can I say this?—let me think a moment—" Menandros paused. He looked off into the night, at the Forum and the Capitol far across the valley. "You know," he said at last, "I'm a relatively young man, but I've made a considerable study of Imperial history, both Eastern and Western, and I think I know what is required to be a successful emperor. We have a Greek word—*charisma,* do you know it? —it is something like your Latin word *virtus,* but not quite—that describes the quality that one must have. But there are many sorts of charisma. One can rule well through sheer force of personality, through the awe and fear and respect that one engenders—Justinianus is a good example of that, or Vespasianus of ancient times, or Titus Gallius. One can rule through a combination of great personal determination and guile, as Augustus did, and Diocletianus. One can be a man of grace and deep wisdom—Hadrianus, say, or Marcus Aurelius. One can win acclaim through great military valor: I think of Trajan here, and Gaius Martius, and your two emperors who bore the name Maximilianus. But—" and again Menandros paused, and this time he drew in his breath deeply before continuing— "if one has neither grace, nor wisdom, nor valor, nor guile, nor the capability to engender fear and respect—"

"Heraclius will be able to engender fear, I think," said Faustus.

"Fear, yes. Any emperor can do that, at least for a time. Caligula, eh? Nero. Domitianus. Commodus."

"The four that you name were all eventually assassinated, I think," Faustus said.

"Yes. That is so, isn't it?" The litters were arriving now. Menandros turned to him and gave him a serene, almost unworldly smile. "How odd it is, Faustus, would you not say, that the two royal brothers are so far from being alike, and that the one who has charisma is so little interested in serving his Empire as its ruler, and the one who is destined to have the throne has so little charisma? What a pity that is: for them, for you, perhaps, even, for the world. It is one of the little jokes that the gods like to play, eh, my friend? But what the gods may find amusing is not so amusing for us, sometimes."

There was no visit to the Underworld the following day. From Menandros came a message declaring that he would remain in his quarters all that day, preparing dispatches to be sent to Constantinopolis. The Caesar Maximilianus likewise sent word to Faustus that his company would not be required that day. Faustus spent it dealing with the copious outpouring of routine documents his own office endlessly generated, holding his regular midweek meeting with the other functionaries of the Chancellery, soaking for several hours at the public baths, and dining with the little bright-eyed Numidian, who watched him wordlessly across the table for an hour and a half, eating very little herself—she had the appetite of a bird, a very small bird—and following him obligingly to the couch when the meal was done. After she had gone he lay in bed reading, at random choice, one of the plays of Seneca, the gory *Thyestes,* until he came upon a passage he would just as soon not have seen that evening: "I live in mighty fear that all the universe will be broken into a thousand fragments in the general ruin, that formless chaos will return and vanquish the gods and men, that the earth and sea will be engulfed by the planets wandering in the heavens." Faustus stared at those words until they swam before his eyes. The next lines rose up before him, then: "Of all the generations, it is we who have been chosen to merit the bitter fate, to be crushed by the falling pieces of the broken sky." That was unappealing bedtime reading. He tossed the scroll aside and closed his eyes.

And so, he thought, passes another day in the life of Faustus Flavius Constantinus Caesar. The barbarians are massing at the gates, the emperor is dying day by day, the heir apparent is out in the forest poking spears into hapless wild beasts, and old Faustus shuffles foolish official papers, lolls half a day in a great marble tub of warm water, amuses himself for a while with a dusky plaything of a girl, and stumbles upon evil omens as he tries to read himself to sleep.

The next day commenced with the arrival of one of Menandros's slaves, bearing a note telling him that it was the ambassador's pleasure to carry out a third exploration of the subterranean city in mid-afternoon. He had a special interest, Menandros said, in seeing the chapel of Priapus and the pool of the Baptai, and perhaps the catacomb of the sacred whores of Chaldea. The ambassador's mood, it seemed, had taken an erotic turn.

Quickly Faustus dashed off a note to the Caesar Maximilianus, telling him of the day's plans and requesting him to summon Danielus bar-Heap the Hebrew once more to be their guide. "Let me know by the sixth hour where you would like us to meet you," Faustus concluded. But midday came and went with no reply from the prince. A second message produced no response either. By now it was nearly time for Faustus to set out for the Severan Palace to pick up the ambassador. It was beginning to look as though he would be Menandros's sole escort on today's expedition. But Faustus realized then that he did not care for that idea: he felt too dour this morning, too cheerless and morose. He needed Maximilianus's high-spirited company to get him through the task.

"Take me to the Caesar," he told his bearers.

Maximilianus, unbathed, unshaven, red-eyed, wearing a coarse old robe with great rents in it, looked startled to see him. "What is this, Faustus? Why do you come to me unannounced?"

"I sent two notes this morning, Caesar. We are to take the Greek to the Underworld again."

The prince shrugged. Clearly he hadn't seen either one. "I've been awake only an hour. And had only three hours of sleep before that. It's been a difficult night. My father is dying."

"Yes. Of course. We have all been aware of that sad fact for some time, and are greatly grieved by it," said Faustus unctuously. "Perhaps it will come as a deliverance when His Majesty's long ordeal is—"

"I don't mean simply that he's sick. I mean that he's in his last hours, Faustus. I've been in attendance on him all night at the palace."

Faustus blinked in surprise. "Your father is in Roma?"

"Of course. Where do you think he'd be?"

"There were stories that he was in Capraea, or Sicilia, or perhaps even Africa—"

"All those stories are so much nitwit blather. He's been right here for months, since he came back from taking the waters at Baiae. Didn't you know that? —Visited by only a very few, of course, because he's become so feeble, and even the shortest of conversations drains his strength. But yesterday about noon he entered into some sort of crisis. Began vomiting black blood, and there were some tremendous convulsions. The whole corps of doctors was sent for. A whole army of them and every last one of them determined to be the one who saves his life, even if they kill him in the process." In an almost manic way Maximilianus began to list the remedies that had been employed in the last twenty-four hours: applications of lion's fat, potations of dog's milk, frogs boiled in vinegar, dried cicadas dissolved in wine, figs stuffed with mouse liver, dragon's tongue boiled in oil, the eyes of river crabs, and any number of other rare and costly medicines, virtually the whole potent pharmacopeia—enough medication, Faustus thought, to do even a healthy man in. And they had done even more. They had drawn his blood. They had bathed him in tubs of honey sprinkled with powdered gold. They had coated him in warm mud from the slopes of Vesuvius. "And the ultimate preposterous touch, just before dawn," said Maximilianus: "the naked virgin who touches her hand to him and invokes Apollo three times to restrain the progress of his disease. It's a wonder they could even *find* a virgin on such short order. Of course, they could always create one by retroactive decree, I guess." And the prince smiled a savage smile. But Faustus could see that it was mere bravado, a strenuously willed flash of the sort of cool cynicism Faustus was supposed to expect from him: the expression in the Caesar's red-rimmed, swollen eyes was that of a young man pained to the core by his beloved father's suffering.

"Will he die today, do you think?" Faustus asked.

"Probably not. The doctors told me that his strength is prodigious, even now. He'll last at least another day, even two or three, perhaps—but no more than that."

"And is your brother with him?"

"My brother?" Maximilianus said, in a dumbfounded tone. "My brother's at his hunting lodge, you told me!"

"He came back, the night before last. Gave audience to the Greek at the Hall of Marcus Anastasius. I was there myself."

"No," Maximilianus muttered. "No. The bastard! The bastard!"

"The whole meeting lasted perhaps fifteen minutes, I suppose. And then he announced that he would be leaving town again the next morning, but surely, once he found out that your father was so gravely ill—" Faustus, comprehending suddenly, stared in disbelief. "You mean you never saw him at all yesterday? He didn't go to visit your father at any time during the day?"

For a moment neither of them could speak.

Maximilianus said, finally, "Death frightens him. The sight of it, the smell of it, the thought of it. He can't bear to be near anyone who's ill. And so he's been careful to keep his distance from the emperor since he took sick. In any case he's never cared a spoonful of spider's piss for my father. It's perfectly in character for him to come to Roma and sleep right under the same roof as the old man and not even take the trouble of making inquiries after his health, let alone going to see him, and then leave again the next day. So he would never have found out that the end was getting very close. As for me, I wouldn't have expected him to bother getting in touch with me while he was here."

"He should be summoned back to Roma again," Faustus said.

"Yes. I suppose he should be. He'll be emperor in another day or two, you know." Maximilianus gave Faustus a bleary look. He seemed half addled with fatigue. "Will you do it, Faustus? Straight away. Meanwhile I'll bathe and dress. The Greek is waiting for us to take him down below, isn't he?"

Thunderstruck, Faustus said, "You mean you want to go there now—today?—while—while your father—?"

"Why not? There's nothing I can do for the old man right now, is there? And his doctors solemnly assure me that he'll last the day." A kind of eerie iciness had come over the Caesar suddenly. Faustus wanted to back away from the chill that emanated from him. In a fierce, cold voice Maximilianus said, "Anyway, I'm not the one who's going to become emperor. It's my brother's responsibility to stand around waiting to pick up the reins, not mine. Send a messenger off to Heraclius to tell him he had better get himself back here as fast as he can, and let's you and I and the Greek go off and have ourselves a little fun. It may be our last chance for a long time."

On such short notice there was no way of finding the Hebrew, so they would have to do without his invaluable assistance for today's outing. Faustus felt edgy about that, because spying on the chapel of Priapus was not without its risks, and he preferred to have the strong, fearless bar-Heap along in case they blundered into any trouble. Maximilianus, though, did not appear to be worried. The prince's mood seemed an unusually impetuous one, even for him, this day. His fury over his brother's absence and the strain of his father's illness had left him very tightly strung indeed, a man who gave every indication of being on the verge of some immense explosion.

But his demeanor was calm enough as he led the way down the winding ramp that entered the Underworld beside the Baths of Constantinus and guided them toward the grotto where the rites of Priapus were enacted. The passageway was low-roofed and moist-walled, with splotchy gray-green fungoid stains clinging to its sides. Menandros, as they neared their goal, displayed such signs of boyish anticipation that Faustus felt both amusement and contempt. Did they no longer have any such shady cults in Constantinopolis? Was Justinianus such a stern master that they had all been suppressed, when Justinianus's own wife Theodora was herself a former actress, said to be of the loosest morality imaginable?

"This way," Maximilianus whispered, indicating an opening in the cavern wall, the merest sliver of an entrance. "It takes us up and over the chapel, where we'll have a very good view. But be absolutely quiet in there. A single sneeze and we're done for, because this is the only way out, and they'll be waiting for us here with hatchets if they find out we've been spying on them."

The passage slanted sharply upward. It was impossible for men as tall as Maximilianus or Faustus to stand upright in it, though Menandros had no difficulty. The nimble young Maximilianus moved easily there, but Faustus, slow and bulky, found every step a challenge. Quickly he was sweating and panting. Once he banged his lantern against the wall and sent a reverberant thump down the length of the passage that drew an angry hiss and a glare from Maximilianus.

Before long came confirmation that a service was in progress: a clash of cymbals, the booming of drums, the hoarse screech of horns, the high jabbing of flutes. When they reached the place from which the scene below could best be viewed, Maximilianus gestured for the lanterns to be laid to one side where they would cast no gleam that could be spied from the shrine, and moved Menandros into position for the best view.

Faustus did not even try to look. He had seen it all too many times before:

the wall covered with gaudy erotic murals, the great altar of the god of lust, and the seated figure of Priapus himself with his enormous phallus rising like a pillar of stone from his thighs. Half a dozen naked worshippers, all of them women, were dancing before that fearsome idol. Their bodies were oiled and painted; their eyes had a wild, frantic shine; their nostrils were distended, their lips were drawn back in toothy grimaces, and the dancers' swinging breasts bobbled freely about as they leaped and pranced.

Chanted words came up from below, harsh jabbing rhythms:

"Come to me, great Lord Priapus, as sunlight comes to the morning sky. Come to me, great Lord Priapus, and give me favor, sustenance, elegance, beauty, and delight. Your names in heaven are LAMPTHEN—OUOTH OUASTHEN—OUTHI OAMENOTH—ENTHOMOUCH. And I know your forms: in the east you are an ibis, in the west you are a wolf, in the north you have the form of a serpent, and in the south you are an eagle. Come to me, Lord Priapus—come to me, Lord Priapus, come—"

One by one the women danced up to the great statue, kissed the tip of that great phallus, caressed it lasciviously.

"I invoke you, Priapus! Give me favor, form, beauty! Give me delight. For you are I, and I am you. Your name is mine, and mine is yours."

There was a tremendous demoniacal clatter of drumming. Faustus knew what that meant: one of the worshippers was mounting the statue of the god. Menandros, avidly staring, leaned much too far forward. At this stage of the ceremony there was little risk that any of the impassioned celebrants would look upward and catch a glimpse of him, but there was some danger that he might go tumbling down into the cavern below and land amongst them. It had been known to happen. Death was the penalty for any man found spying on the rites of the adherents of Priapus. Faustus reached for him; but Maximilianus had already caught him and was tugging him back.

Though covert surveillance of these rites was forbidden, men were not entirely excluded from the chapel. Faustus knew that five or six strapping slaves were lined up along the wall of the chapel in the shadows behind the statue. Soon the priestess of Priapus would give the signal and the orgy would begin.

They practically needed to drag Menandros away. He crouched by the rim of the aperture like a small boy greedy to discover the intimate secrets of womankind, and even after the event had gone on and on long beyond the point where even the most curious of men should have been sated by the sight, Menandros wanted to see more. Faustus was baffled by this strange hunger of his. He could barely remember a time when any of what was taking place down there had been new and unfamiliar to him, and it was hard to understand Menandros's passionate curiosity over so ordinary a matter as orgiastic copulation. The court of the emperor Justinianus, Faustus thought, must place an extraordinarily high value on chastity and propriety. But that was not what Faustus had been told.

At last they got the ambassador out of there and they went on to the next place on his list, the pool of the Baptai. "I'll wait for you here," said Faustus, as they arrived at the steep spiraling stairway that led down into the pit of utter blackness where the rites of this cult of immersion occurred. "I'm getting too fat and slow for that much clambering."

It was, he knew, an enchanting place: the smooth-walled rock-hewn chambers bedecked with iridescent glass mosaics in white and red and blue, brightened even further by splashes and touches of vivid golden paint, the scenes of Diana at the hunt, of cooing doves, of cupids swimming among swans, of voluptuous nymphs, of rampant satyrs. But the air was damp and heavy, the interminable downward spiral of the narrow, slippery stone steps would be hard on his aging legs, and the final taxing stage of the long descent, the one that went from the chamber of the mosaics to the fathomless black pool that lay at the lowest level, was beyond all doubt much too much for him. And of course the mere thought of the ascent afterward was utterly appalling.

So he waited. A tinkling trickle of laughter drifted up to him out of the darkness. The goddess Bendis of Thrace was the deity worshipped here, a coarse lank-haired demon whose devotees were utterly shameless, and at any hour of the day or night one generally could find a service in progress, a ritual that involved the usual sort of orgiastic stuff enlivened by a climactic baptismal plunge into the icy pool, where Bendis lurked to provide absolution for sins just committed and encouragement for those yet to come. This was no secret cult. All were welcome here. But the mysteries of the cult of Bendis were no longer mysterious to Faustus. He had had baptism in those freezing waters often enough for one lifetime; he did not seek it again. And the skillful ministrations of his Numidian playmate Oalathea were gratification enough for his diminishing lusts these days.

It was a very long time before Menandros and Maximilianus returned from the depths. They said little when they emerged, but it was clear from the flushed, triumphant look on the little Greek's face that he had found whatever ecstasies he had been seeking in the shrine of the Baptai.

Now it was time for the place of the Chaldean whores, far across the underground city near the welter of caverns below the Circus Maximus. Menandros seemed to have heard a great deal about these women, most of it incorrect. "You mustn't call them whores, you know," Faustus explained. "What they are is prostitutes— sacred prostitutes."

"This is a very subtle distinction," said the Greek wryly.

"What he means," said the Caesar, "is that they're all women of proper social standing, who belong to a cult that came to us out of Babylonia. Some of them are of Babylonian descent themselves, most are not. Either way, the women of this cult are required at some point in their lives, between the ages of—what is it, Faustus, sixteen and thirty?—something like that—to go to the sanctuary of their goddess and sit there waiting for some stranger to come along and choose her for the night. He throws a small silver coin into her lap, and she must rise and go with him, however hideous he is, however repellent. And with that act she fulfills her obligation to her goddess, and returns therewith to a life of blameless purity."

"Some, I understand, are said to go back more than once to fulfill their obligations," Faustus said. "Out of an excess of piety, I suppose. Unless it is for the simple excitement of meeting strangers, of course."

"I must see this," Menandros said. He was aglow with boyish eagerness again. "Virtuous women, you say, wives and daughters of substantial men? And they *must* give themselves? They can't refuse under any circumstances? Justinianus will find this hard to believe."

"It is an Eastern thing," said Faustus. "Out of Babylonian Chaldea. How strange that you have none of this at your own capital." It did not ring true. From all accounts Faustus had heard, Constantinopolis was at least as much a hotbed of Oriental cults as Roma itself. He began to wonder whether there was some reason of state behind Menandros's apparent desire to paint the Eastern Empire as a place of such rigorous piety and virtue. Perhaps it had something to do with the terms of the treaty that

Menandros had come here to negotiate. But he could not immediately see what the connection might be.

Nor did they see the holy Chaldean prostitutes that day. They were less than halfway across the Underworld when they became aware of a muddled din of upraised voices coming to them out of the Via Subterranea ahead, and as they drew closer to that broad thoroughfare they began to distinguish some detail of individual words. The shouts still were blurred and confused, but what they seemed to be saying was:

"The emperor is dead! The emperor is dead!"

"Can it be?" Faustus asked. "Am I hearing rightly?"

But then it came again, a male voice with the force of the bellowings of a bull rising above all the others: "THE EMPEROR IS DEAD! THE EMPEROR IS DEAD!" There was no possible doubt of the meaning now.

"So soon," Maximilianus murmured, in a voice that could have been that of a dead man itself. "It wasn't supposed to happen today."

Faustus glanced toward the Caesar. His face was chalk-white, as though he had spent his whole life in these underground caverns, and his eyes had a hard, frightening glitter to them that gave them the look of brilliantly polished sapphires. Those stony eyes were terrifying to behold.

A man in the loose yellow robes of some Asian priesthood came running toward them, looking half unhinged by fear. He stumbled up against Maximilianus in the narrow hallway and tried to shoulder his way past, but the Caesar, seizing the man by both forearms and holding him immobilized, thrust his face into the other's and demanded to know the news. "His Majesty—" the man gasped, goggle-eyed. He had a thick Syrian lisp. "Dead. They have lit the great bonfire before the palace. The Praetorians have gone into the street to maintain order."

Muttering a curse, Maximilianus shoved the Syrian away from him so vehemently that the man went ricocheting off the wall, and turned his gaze toward Faustus. "I must go to the palace," the Caesar said, and without another word turned and ran, leaving Faustus and Menandros behind as he vanished in furious long-legged strides toward the Via Subterranea.

Menandros looked overwhelmed by the news. "We should not be here either," he said.

"No. We should not."

"Are we to go to the palace, then?"

"It could be dangerous. Anything can happen, when an emperor dies and the heir apparent isn't on the scene." Faustus slipped his arm through the Greek's. Menandros appeared startled at that, but seemed quickly to understand that it was for the sake of keeping them from being separated in the growing chaos of the underground city. Thus linked, they set out together for the nearest exit ramp.

The news had spread everywhere by now, and hordes of people were running madly to and fro. Faustus, though his heart was pounding from the exertion, moved as quickly as he was able, virtually dragging Menandros along with him, using his bulk to shove anyone who blocked his path out of the way.

"The emperor is dead!" the endless chorus cried. "The emperor is dead!" As he came forth blinking into the daylight, Faustus saw the look of stunned shock on every face.

He felt a little stunned himself, though Emperor Maximilianus's passing had not exactly come as a bolt out of the blue to him. But the old man had held the throne for more than forty years, one of the longest reigns in Roman history, longer even than Augustus's, perhaps second only to that of his grandfather the first Maximilianus. These Etruscan emperors were long-lived men. Faustus had been a slender stripling the last time the Imperial throne had changed hands, and that other time the succession had been handled well, the magnificent young prince who was to become Maximilianus II standing at the side of his dying father in his last moments, and going immediately thereafter to the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus to receive the homage of the Senate and to accept the badges and titles of office.

This was a different situation. There was no magnificent young heir waiting to take the throne, only the deplorable Prince Heraclius, and Heraclius had so contrived matters that he was not even at the capital on the day of his father's death. Great surprises sometimes happened when the throne became vacant and the expected heir was not on hand to claim it. That was how the stammering cripple Claudius had become emperor when Caligula was assassinated. That was how Titus Gallius had risen to greatness after the murder of Caracalla. For that matter, that was the way the first of the Etruscans had come to power, when Theodosius, having outlived his own son Honorius, had finally died in 1168. Who could say what shifts in the balance of power might be accomplished in Roma before this day reached its end?

It was Faustus's duty now to get Justinianus's ambassador safely back to the Severan Palace, and then to make his own way to the Chancellery to await the developments of the moment. But Menandros did not quite seem to grasp the precariousness of the situation. He was fascinated by the tumult in the streets, and, feckless tourist that he was at heart, wanted to head for the Forum to watch the action at first hand. Faustus had to push the bounds of diplomatic courtesy a little to get him to abandon that foolhardy idea and head for the safety of his own quarters. Menandros agreed reluctantly, but only after seeing a phalanx of Praetorians moving through the street across from them, freely clubbing anyone who seemed to be behaving in a disorderly fashion.

Faustus was the last of the officials of the Chancellery to reach the administrative headquarters, just across the way from the royal palace. The chancellor, Licinius Obsequens, greeted him sourly. "Where have you been all this while, Faustus?"

"With the ambassador Menandros, touring the Underworld," Faustus replied, just as sourly. He cared very little for Licinius Obsequens, a wealthy Neapolitan who had bribed his way to high office, and he suspected that under the new emperor neither he nor Licinius Obsequens would continue to hold their posts at the Chancellery, anyway. "The ambassador was very eager to visit the chapel of Priapus, and other such places," Faustus added, with a bit of malice to his tone. "So we took him there. How was I to know that the emperor was going to die today?"

"*We* took him, Faustus?"

"The Caesar Maximilianus and I."

Licinius's yellowish eyes narrowed to slits. "Of course. Your good friend the Caesar. And where is the Caesar now, may I ask?"

"He left us," said Faustus, "the moment news reached us underground of His Majesty's death. I have no information about where he might be at the present time. The Imperial palace, I would imagine." He paused a moment. "And the Caesar Heraclius, who is our emperor now? Has anyone happened to hear from him?"

"He is at the northern frontier," Licinius said.

"No. No, he isn't. He's off at his hunting lodge behind Lake Nemorensis. He never went north at all."

Licinius was visibly rocked by that. "You know this for a fact, Faustus?"

"Absolutely. I sent a message to him there, just the other night, and he came back to the city that evening and met with the ambassador Menandros. I was there, as it happens." A look of sickly astonishment came over Licinius's jowly face. Faustus was beginning to enjoy this more than somewhat. "The Caesar then went back to his forest preserve yesterday morning. Early today, when I was informed of His Majesty's grave condition, I sent a second message to him at the lake, once more summoning him to Roma. Beyond that I can tell you nothing."

"You knew that the Caesar was hunting, and not at the frontier, and never reported this to me?" Licinius asked.

Loftily Faustus said, "Sir, I was wholly preoccupied with looking after the Greek ambassador. It is a complicated task. It never occurred to me that you were unaware of the movements of the Caesar Heraclius. I suppose I assumed that when he reached Roma the night before last he would take the trouble to meet with his father's chancellor and ascertain the state of his father's health, but evidently it didn't occur to him to do that, and therefore—"

Abruptly he cut his words short. Asellius Proculus, the Prefect of the Praetorian Guard, had just shouldered his way into the room. For the Praetorian Prefect to set foot in the Chancellery at all was an unusual event; for him to be here on the day of the emperor's death verged on the unthinkable. Licinius Obsequens, who was starting to look like a man besieged, gaped at him in consternation.

"Asellius? What—"

"A message," the Praetorian Prefect said hoarsely. "From Lake Nemorensis." He signaled with an upraised thumb and a man in the green uniform of the Imperial courier service came lurching in. He was glassy-eyed and rumpled and haggard, as though he had run all the way from the lake without pausing. Pulling a rolled-up dispatch from his tunic, he thrust it with a trembling hand toward Licinius Obsequens, who snatched at it, opened it, read it through, read it again. When the chancellor looked up at Faustus his plump face was sagging in shock.

"What does it say?" Faustus asked. Licinius seemed to be having difficulties forming words.

"The Caesar," Licinius said. "His Majesty the emperor, that is. Wounded. A hunting accident, this morning. He remains at his lodge. The Imperial surgeons have been called."

"Wounded? How seriously?"

Licinius responded with a blank look. "Wounded, it says. That's all: wounded. The Caesar has been wounded, while hunting. The emperor. —He *is* our emperor now, is he not?" The chancellor seemed numb, as though he had had a stroke. To the courier he said, "Do you know any other details, man? How badly is he hurt? Did you see him yourself? Who's in charge at the lodge?" But the courier knew nothing. He had been given the message by a member of the Caesar's guard and told to get it immediately to the capital; that was all he was able to report.

Four hours later, dining with the ambassador Menandros in the ambassador's rooms at the Severan Palace, Faustus said, "The messages continued to come in from the lake all afternoon. Wounded, first. Then, wounded seriously. Then a description of the wound: speared in the gut by one of his own men, he was, some sort of confusion while they were closing in on a boar for the kill, somebody's horse rearing at the wrong moment. Then the next message, half an hour later: the Imperial surgeons are optimistic. Then, the Caesar Heraclius is dying. And then: the Caesar Heraclius is dead."

"The emperor Heraclius, should you not call him?" Menandros asked.

"It's not certain who died first, the emperor Maximilianus at Roma or the Caesar Heraclius at Lake Nemorensis. I suppose they can work all that out later. But what difference does it make, except to the historians? Dead is dead. Whether he died as Heraclius Caesar or as Heraclius Augustus, he's still dead, and his brother is our next emperor. Can you believe it? Maximilianus going to be emperor? One moment he's wallowing around with you in some orgy at the pool of the Baptai, and the next he's sitting on the throne. Maximilianus! The last thing he ever imagined, becoming emperor."

"That soothsayer told him that he would," Menandros said.

A shiver of awe ran through Faustus. "Yes! Yes, by Isis, so he did! And Maximilianus was as furious as though the man had laid a curse on him. Which perhaps he had." Shakily he refilled his wine-bowl. "*Emperor!* Maximilianus!"

"Have you seen him yet?"

"No, not yet. It isn't seemly to rush to him so fast."

"You were his closest friend, weren't you?"

"Yes, yes, of course. And doubtless there'll be some benefit to that." Faustus allowed himself a little smirk of pleasure. "Under Heraclius, I'd have been finished, I suppose. Pensioned off, shipped to the country. But it'll be different for me with Maximilianus in charge. He'll need me. He will, won't he?" The thought had only then occurred to him in any coherent way. But the more he examined it, the more it pleased him. "He's never cultivated any of the court officials; he doesn't know them, really, won't know which ones to trust, which to get rid of. I'm the only one who can advise him properly. I might even become chancellor, Menandros, do you realize that? —But that's exactly why I haven't gone speeding over to see him tonight. He's busy with the priests, anyway, doing whatever religious rites it is a new emperor is supposed to perform, and then the senators are calling on him one by one, and so on and so forth. It would be too blatant, wouldn't it, if I turned up there so soon, his bawdy and disreputable old drinking companion Faustus, who by coming around the very first night would be sending an all too obvious signal that he's showing up right away to claim his reward for these years of hearty good fellowship the two of us have shared. No, Menandros, I wouldn't do anything so crass. Maximilianus is not going to forget me. Tomorrow, I suppose, he'll be holding his first *salutatio,* and I can come around then and—"

"His what? I don't know the word."

"*Salutatio?* You must know what that means. In your language you'd say, 'a greeting.' But what it is in Imperial terms is a mass audience with the Roman populace: the emperor sits enthroned in the Forum, and the people pass before him and salute him and hail him as emperor. It'll be quite appropriate for me to go before him then, with all the rest. And have him smile at me, and wink, and say, 'Come to me after all this nonsense is over, Faustus, because we have important things to discuss.'"

"This is not a custom we have at Constantinopolis, the *salutatio,*" Menandros said.

"A Roman thing, it is."

"We are Romans also, you know."

"So you are. But you are Greekified Romans, you Easterners—in your particular case, a Romanized Greek, even—with customs that bear the tincture of the old Oriental despots who lie far back in your history, the Pharaohs, the Persian kings, Alexander the Great. Whereas we are Romans of Roma. We once had a Republic here that chose its leaders every year, do you know that?—two outstanding men whom the Senate picked to share power with each other, and at the end of their year they would step down and two others were brought forward. We lived like that for hundreds of years, ruled by our Consuls, until a few problems arose and it became necessary for Augustus Caesar to alter the arrangements somewhat. But we still maintain some traces of that staunch old Republic of the early days. The *salutatio* is one of them."

"I see," Menandros said. He did not sound impressed. He busied himself with his wine for a time. Then, breaking a long silence that had developed between them, he said, "You don't think Prince Maximilianus might have had his brother murdered, do you?"

"*What?*"

"Hunting accidents aren't all that hard to arrange. A scuffle among the horses in the morning fog, an unfortunate little collision, a spear thrust in the wrong place—"

"Are you serious, Menandros?"

"About half, I'd say. These things have been known to happen. Even I could see from the very first what contempt Maximilianus had for his brother. And now that the old emperor was on his last legs. The Empire would go to the unpopular and inadequate Heraclius. So your friend the Caesar, either for the good of the Empire or purely out of the love of power, decides to have Heraclius removed, just as the emperor is plainly sinking toward his end. The assassin then is slain also, to keep him quiet in case there's an inquest and he's put to the torture, and there you are—Heraclius is gone and Maximilianus III Augustus is in charge. It's not impossible. What became of the man who put the spear into Prince Heraclius, do you by any chance know?"

"He killed himself within an hour of the event, as a matter of fact, out of sheer chagrin. Do you think Maximilianus bribed him to do that, too?"

Menandros smiled faintly and made no reply. This was all just a game for him, Faustus realized.

"The good of the Empire," Faustus said, "is not a concept upon which the Caesar Maximilianus has ever expended much thought. If you were listening closely to much of what he said when he was in our company, you might have perceived that. As for the love of power, here you will have to take my word for it, but I think he has not an atom of that within himself. You saw how enraged he became when that idiot of a soothsayer told him he was going to be a great hero of the Empire? 'You are mocking me to my face,' Maximilianus said, or words to that effect. And then, when the man went on to predict that Maximilianus was going to become emperor, too—" Faustus laughed. "No, my friend, there was never any conspiracy here. Not even in his dreams did Maximilianus see himself as an emperor. What happened to Prince Heraclius was mere accident, the gods making sport with us yet again, and my guess is that our new emperor is having a hard time coming to terms with fate's little prank. I would go so far as to say that he is the unhappiest man in Roma tonight."

"Poor Roma," said Menandros.

* * *

A *salutatio,* yes, the very next day. Faustus was correct about that. The line was already forming when he got himself down to the Forum, bathed and shaven and clad in his finest toga, in the third hour after sunrise.

And there was Maximilianus, resplendent in the purple Imperial toga with the border of threads of gold, sitting enthroned in front of the Temple of Jupiter Imperator. A crown of laurel was on his head. He looked magnificent, as a new emperor should: utterly upright of posture, a calm, graceful figure who displayed in every aspect an almost godlike look of the highest nobility far removed from any expression Faustus had seen him wear during his roistering days. Faustus's bosom swelled with pride at the sight of him sitting like that. What a superb actor the Caesar is, Faustus thought, what a glorious fraud!

But I must not think of him as the Caesar any more. Wonder of wonders, he is the Augustus now, Maximilianus III of Roma.

The Praetorians were keeping the line under careful control. The members of the Senate had already passed through, it seemed, because Faustus saw none of them in evidence. That was appropriate: they should be the first to hail a new emperor. Faustus was pleased to note that he had arrived just in time to join the line of officials of the late emperor's court. He caught sight of Chancellor Licinius up ahead, and the Minister of the Privy Purse, the Chamberlain of the Imperial Bedroom, the Master of the Treasury, the Master of the Horses, and most of the others, down to such mid-level people as the Prefect of Works, the Master of Greek Letters, the Secretary of the Council, the Master of Petitions. Faustus, joining the group, exchanged nods and smiles with a few of them, but said nothing to anyone. He knew that he was conspicuous among them, not only because of his height and bulk, but also because they must all be aware that he was the dearest friend the unexpected new emperor had, and was likely to receive significant preferment in the administration that soon would be taking form. The golden aura of power, Faustus thought, must already be gathering about his shoulders as he stood here in the line.

The line moved forward at a very slow pace. Each man in turn, as he came before Maximilianus, made the proper gestures of respect and obeisance, and Maximilianus responded with a smile, a word or two, an amiable lifting of his hand. Faustus was amazed at the easy assurance of his manner. He seemed to be enjoying this, too. It might all be a wondrous pretense, but Maximilianus was making it seem as though it were he, and not the lamented Prince Heraclius, who had been schooled all his life for this moment of ascension to the summit of power.

And at last Faustus himself was standing before the emperor.

"Your Majesty," Faustus murmured humbly, relishing the words. He bowed. He knelt. He closed his eyes a moment to savor the wonder of it all. *Rise, Faustus Flavius Constantinus Caesar, you who are to be Imperial Chancellor in the government of the third Maximilianus,* is what he imagined the emperor would say.

Faustus rose. The emperor said nothing at all. His lean, youthful face was solemn. His blue eyes seemed cold and hard. It was the iciest look Faustus had ever seen.

"Your Majesty," Faustus said again, in a huskier, more rasping tone this time. And then, very softly, with a smile, a bit of the old twinkle: "What an ironic turn of fate this all is, Maximilianus! How playful destiny is with our lives! —Emperor! Emperor! And I know what pleasure you will get from it, my lord."

The icy gaze was unrelenting. A quiver of something like impatience, or perhaps it was irritation, was visible on Maximilianus's lips. "You speak as though you know me," the emperor said. "Do you? And do I know you?"

That was all. He beckoned, the merest movement of the tips of the fingers of his left hand, and Faustus knew that he must move along. The emperor's words resounded in his mind as he made his way across the front of the temple and up the path that led from the Forum to the Palatine Hill. *Do you know me? Do I know you?*

Yes. He knew Maximilianus, and Maximilianus knew him. It was all a joke, Maximilianus having a little amusement at his expense in this first meeting between them since everything had changed. But some things, Faustus knew, had not changed, and never could. They had seen in the dawn together too many times, the prince and he, for any transformation to come over their friendship now, however strangely and marvelously Maximilianus himself had been transformed by his brother's death.

But still—

Still—

It was a joke, yes, that Maximilianus had been playing on him, but it was a cruel one for all that, and although Faustus knew that the prince could be cruel, the prince had never been cruel to him. Until now. And perhaps not even now. It had been mere playfulness just now, those words of his. Yes. Yes. Mere playfulness, nothing more, Maximilianus's style of humor making itself known even here on the day of his ascent to the throne.

Faustus returned to his lodgings.

For the three days following, he had little company but his own. The Chancellery, like all the offices of the government, would be closed all this week for the double funeral of the old emperor Maximilianus and the prince his son, and then the ceremonies of installation of the new emperor Maximilianus. Maximilianus himself was inaccessible to Faustus, as he was to virtually everyone but the highest officials of the realm. During the formal days of mourning the streets of the city were quiet, for once. Not even the Underworld would be stirring. Faustus remained at home, too dispirited to bother summoning his Numidian. When he wandered over to the Severan Palace to see Menandros, he was told that the ambassador, as the representative in Roma of the new emperor's Imperial colleague of the East, the Basileus Justinianus, had been called into conference at the royal palace, and would be staying at the palace for the duration of the meetings.

On the fourth day Menandros returned. Faustus saw the litter bearing him crossing the Palatine, and unhesitatingly hurried across to the Severan to greet him. Perhaps Menandros would bear some word for him from Maximilianus.

Indeed he did. Menandros handed Faustus a bit of parchment sealed with the Imperial seal and said, "The emperor gave me this for you."

Faustus yearned to open it at once, but that seemed unwise. He realized he was a little afraid of finding out what Maximilianus had to say to him, and preferred not to read the message in front of Menandros.

"And the emperor?" Faustus asked. "You found him well?"

"Very well. Not at all troubled by the cares of office, thus far. He has made an excellent adaptation to the great change in his circumstances. You may have been wrong about him, my friend, when you said he had no interest in being emperor. I think he rather likes being emperor."

"He can be very surprising at times," said Faustus.

"I think that is true. Be that as it may, my task here is done. I thank you for your good company, friend Faustus, and for your having enabled me to gain the friendship of the former Caesar Maximilianus. A happy accident, that was. The days I spent with the Caesar in the Underworld greatly facilitated the negotiations I have now completed with him on the treaty of alliance."

"There is a treaty, is there?"

"Oh, yes, most definitely a treaty. His Majesty will marry the emperor Justinianus's sister Sabbatia in the place of his late and much lamented brother. His Majesty has a gift of some wonderful jewelry to offer his bride: magnificent gems, opals, quite fine. He showed them to me himself. And there will be military assistance, of course. The Eastern Empire will send its finest legions to aid your emperor in crushing the barbarians who trouble your borders." Menandros's cheeks were glowing with pleasure. "It has all gone very well, I think. I will leave tomorrow. You will send me, I hope, some of that noble wine of Gallia Transalpina that you shared with me on my first day in Roma? And I will have gifts for you as well, my friend. I am deeply grateful to you for everything. In particular," he said, "for the chapel of Priapus, and the pool of the Baptai, eh, friend Faustus?" And he winked.

Faustus lost no time unsealing the emperor's message once he had escaped from Menandros.

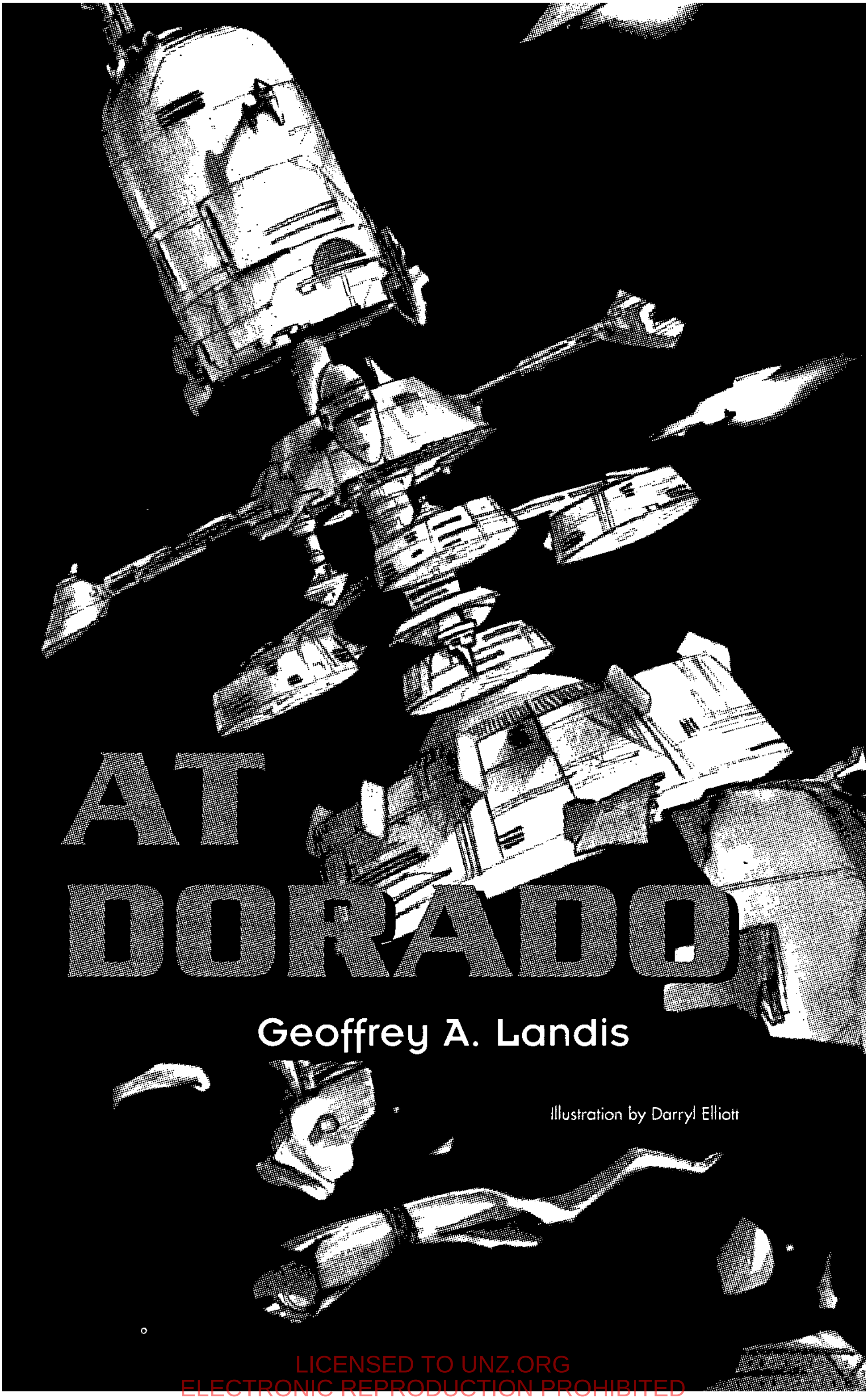
You said you thought our time of greatness was ending, Faustus, that day in the marketplace of the sorcerers. But no, Faustus, you are wrong. We are not ended at all. We are only just begun. It is a new dawn and a new sun rises.

M.

And there below that casually scrawled initial was the formal signature in all its majesty, Imperator Caesar Maximilianus Tiberius Antoninus Augustus.

Faustus's pension was a generous one, and when he and Maximilianus met, as occasionally they did in the early months of Maximilianus's reign, the emperor was affable enough, with always the amicable word, though they never were intimates again. And in the second year of his reign Maximilianus went north to the frontier, where the legions of his royal colleague Justinianus were assembling to join him, and he remained there, doing battle against the barbarians, for the next seven years, which were the last years of Faustus's life.

The northern wars of Maximilianus III ended in complete triumph. Roma would have no further trouble with invading barbarians. It was a significant turning point in the history of the Empire, which now was free to enter into a time of prosperity and abundance such as it had not known since the great days of Trajan and Hadrianus and Antoninus Pius four centuries before. There had been two mighty emperors named Maximilianus before him, but men would never speak of the third Maximilianus otherwise than as Maximilianus the Great. ○

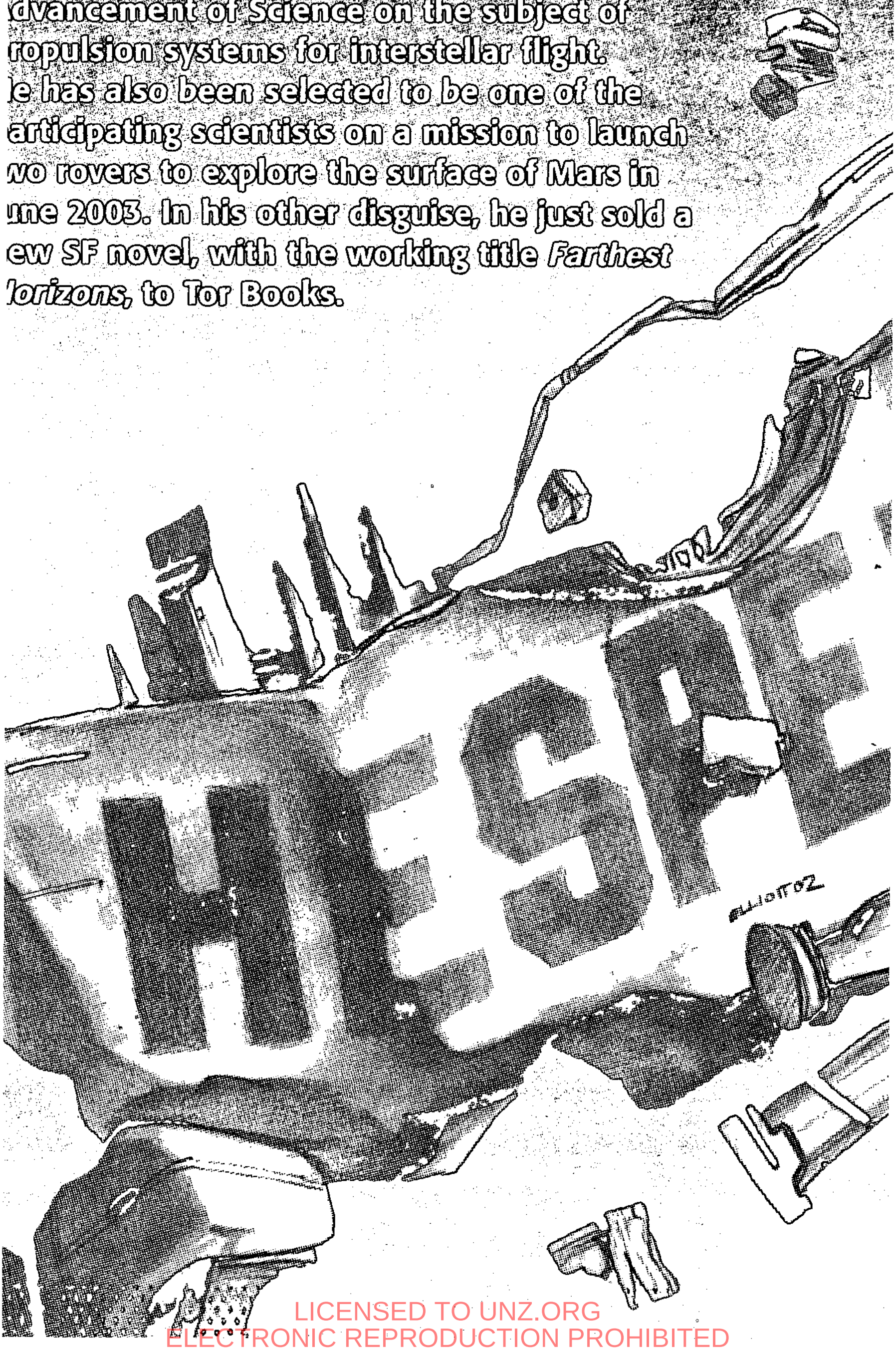


AT DORADO

Geoffrey A. Landis

Illustration by Darryl Elliott

andis recently presented a paper at the annual neeting of the American Association for dvancement of Science on the subject of ropulsion systems for interstellar flight. le has also been selected to be one of the articipating scientists on a mission to launch wo rovers to explore the surface of Mars in une 2003. In his other disguise, he just sold a ew SF novel, with the working title *Farthest lorizons*, to Tor Books.



H brief second she thought that he might be a customer, but then Cheen saw he was wearing a leather harness and jockstrap and almost notl ing else. One of the bar-boys from a dance house along the main spira path to the downside.

In the middle of third shift, there was little business in the bar. Had thei been a ship in port, of course, the bar would be packed with rowdy sailor and she would have been working her ass off trying to keep them all lubr cated and spending their port-pay. But between dockings, the second-shi maintenance workers had already finished their after-work drinks and lef and the place was mostly empty.

It was unusual that a worker from one of the downside establishment would drop into a bar so far upspinward, and Cheena knew instantly tha something was wrong. She flicked the music off—nobody was listening an way—and he spoke.

"Hoya," he said. "A wreck, a wreck! They fish out debris now." The doo hissed shut, and he was gone.

Cheena pushed into the crowd that was already gathered at the mainte nance dock. The gravity was so low at the maintenance docks that the were floating more than standing, and the crowd slowly roiled into the a and back down. Cheena saw the bar-boy who had brought the news, and gaggle of other barmaids and bar-boys, a few maintenance workers, som Cauchy readers, navigators, and a handful of waiting-for-work sailors "Stand back, stand back," a lone security dockworker said. "Nothing to se yet." But nobody moved back. "Which ship was it?" somebody shouted, an two or three others echoed: "What ship? What ship?" That was what every body wanted to know.

"Don't know yet," the security guy said. "Stand back now, stand back."

"*Hesperia,*" said a voice behind. Cheena turned, and the crowd did as wel It was a tug pilot, still wearing his fluorescent yellow flight suit, althoug his helmet was off. "The wreck was *Hesperia*."

There was a moment of silence, and then a soft sigh went through th crowd, followed by a rising babble of voices, some of them relieved, some c them curious, some dazed by the news. *Hesperia,* Cheena thought. The wor was like a silken ribbon suddenly tied around her heart.

"They're bringing debris in now," said the tug pilot.

Some of the girls Cheena knew had many sailors as husbands. It was n great risk; any given ship only came to port once or twice a year, and eac sailor could believe the carefully crafted fiction that Zee or Dayl or whoeve it was was alone, was waiting patient and hopeful for him and only him. the unlikely happens, and two ships with two different sailor-husband come in to port at the same time—well, with luck and connivance and hast ly fabricated excuses, the two husbands would never meet.

Cheena, however, believed in being faithful, and for her there was only on man: Daryn, a navigator. She might earn a few florins by drinking beer wit another sailor, and leading him on, if a ship was in port, and Dari was not o it. What of it? That was, after all, what the barmaids were paid for; drink could just as easily be served by automata. But her heart could belong t only one man, and would only be satisfied if that one man loved only her. An Daryn had loved her. Or so he had once proclaimed, before they had fough

Daryn.

Daryn Bey was short and dark, stocky enough that one might take him for a dockworker instead of a navigator. His skin was the rich black of a deep-space sailor, a color enhanced with biochemical dye to counter ultraviolet irradiation. Against the skin, luminescent white tattoos filigreed across every visible centimeter of his body. When he had finally wooed her and won her and taken her to where they could examine each other in private, she found the rest of him had been tattooed as well, most deliciously tattooed. He was a living artwork, and she could study each tiny centimeter of him for hours.

And Daryn sailed with *Hesperia*.

The wormholes were the port's very reason for existing, the center of Cheena's universe. In view of their importance. it was odd, perhaps, that Cheena almost never went to look at them. In her bleak, destructive mood, she closed the bar and headed upspiral. Patryos, owner of the Subtle Tiger, would be angry at her, because in the hours after news of a wreck, when nobody had yet heard real information and everybody had heard rumors, people would naturally come to the bar; business would be good. Let him come and serve drinks himself, she thought; she needed some solitude. The thought of putting on a show of cheerfulness and passing around gossip along with liquor made her feel slightly sick.

Still, sailors—even navigators—sometimes changed ships. Daryn might not have been on *Hesperia*. It might not be certain that the ship had been *Hesperia*; it could be debris from an ancient wreck, just now washing through the strange time tides of the wormhole. Or it could even be wreckage from far in the future, perhaps some other ship to be named *Hesperia,* one not yet even built. The rigid laws of relativity mean that a wormhole pierces not space alone, but also time. Half of the job of a navigator, Daryn had explained to her once—and the most important half at that—came in making sure that the ship sailed to the right *when* as well as to the right *where*. Sailing a Cauchy loop would rip the ship apart; it was the navigator's calculation to make sure the ship never entered its own past, unless it was safely light-years away. The ship could skim, but never cross, its own Cauchy horizon.

Cheena made her way upspiral, until at last she came to the main viewing lounge. It featured a huge circular window, five meters across, a window that looked out on the emptiness, and on the wormhole. She entered, and then instantly pulled back: the usually empty lounge was throbbing with spectators. Of course it would be, she thought; they are watching a disaster.

She couldn't stay there, but as she stood indecisive, there drifted into her mind like a piece of floating debris the thought that once Daryn had taken her to another viewing area, not exactly a lounge, but a maintenance hanger with a viewport. It was out of the public areas, of course, but Cheena had been at the station since she had been born, and knew that if she always moved briskly, as if she belonged, and arrived at a door just after an authorized person had opened it, nobody would question her. And after a few minutes, she found her maintenance hanger empty.

There was no gravity here, and she floated in front of it, trying to blank away her thoughts.

The port station orbited slowly around the wormhole named *Dorado,* largest of the three wormholes in the nexus. They floated in interstellar space, far from any star, but light was redundant here: there was nothing there to see.

The Dorado wormhole, a thousand kilometers across, could only be seen after the eyes had adapted to the star field, and realized that the stars seen through the wormhole were different from the stars drifting slowly in the background. After her eyes adapted, she could see a dozen tiny sparkles of light orbiting the wormhole, automated beacons to guide starships to correct transit trajectories through the hole. And now she could see ships, tiny one-man maintenance dories, no larger than a coffin with metal arms, drifting purposefully through space, collecting debris.

Cheena deliberately made her mind blank. She didn't want to think about debris, and what that might mean. She stared at the wormhole, telling herself that it was a hole in space ten thousand light-years long, that through the wormhole she was seeing stars nearly on the other side of the galaxy, impossibly distant and yet just a tiny skip away.

Cheena had never been to any of them. She had been born on the station, and would die on the station. Sailors lived for the star passage, loved the disruption of space as they fell through the topological incongruence of the wormholes. The thought filled Cheena with dread. She had never wanted to be anywhere else.

She had explained this to Daryn once. He loved her, couldn't he stay home, with her, make a home on the port? He had laughed, a gentle laugh, a good-hearted laugh that she loved to hear, but still a laugh.

"No, my beautiful one. The stars get into your blood, don't you know? If I stay in port too long, the stars call to me, and if I do not find a ship then, I will go mad." He kissed her gently. "But you know that I will always come back to you."

She nodded, contented but not contented, for she had always known that this was all she could hope for.

Hesperia, she thought. He sailed out on *Hesperia*. She knew that she would never again hear that ship's name spoken, for there was a superstition among the sailors, and the port crew, never to say the name of a wrecked ship aloud. From now on it would be "the ship," or "that ship, you know the one," and everybody would know.

She floated, staring without seeing, for what must have been hours. The tiny dories were returning now, the robotic arms of each cluttered with debris, and tangled in with the debris, they were bringing in the first of the dead.

The port crew had their legends. Some of them might even have been true. Once, according to a story, a ship of ancient design had come unexpectedly to Pskov station. Pskov was a station circling Viadei wormhole, two jumps away from the port. Cheena had never been there, had never left the port, but the rumors circulated through all of the network. Even before the ship had docked, the portkeepers located the records: the ship was *Tsander*. *Tsander* had entered Viadei three hundred and seventy years ago, during a massive solar flare, one of the largest flares ever recorded, and was lost.

Tsander tumbled out of the wormhole mouth with all sensors blind from flare damage, and the tug crew of Pskov station had found it, caught it, stabilized it, and towed it to the docks.

At liberty in the port, the crew of the *Tsander* spoke in strange accents that were barely understandable. It was a miracle that the ship had emerged at all; all its navigation systems—of an unreliable design long since obsolete—were burned out. *Tsander*'s crew had marveled at the size and sophistication of the entertainments of Pskov port, had been incredulous to hear of the extent of the wormhole network. They offered as payment archaic coins of an ancient nation that was now nearly forgotten, coins that had worth only for their value as curiosities.

After a week of repair the crew took their ship *Tsander* back into the wormhole Viadei, vowing that they would return to their own time with a story that would earn drinks for them forever.

No one at the station told them that the ancient logs held comprehensive records of every wormhole passage, and the logs, meticulously kept despite revolutions and disasters and famine, had no record of *Tsander* ever re-emerging in the past.

Perhaps they had known. They were sailors, the crew of *Tsander*: for all that they wore quaint costumes and spoke in archaic accents, they were sailors.

Back at the maintenance dock, Cheena watched, waiting and dreading. She should never have let him go, should have held him tight, instead of pushing him away. The crowd was larger than it had been before, and Cheena was pushed up against a man wearing only a feather cloak over a fur loincloth. "Sorry," she said, and as she said it, she realized that it was the bar-boy from the down-spin dance hall, the one who had first come to the Subtle Tiger and told her that there had been a wreck. On an impulse, she touched his arm. "Name's Cheena," she told him.

He looked back at her, perhaps startled that she had spoken. "Tayo," he said. "You're the mid-shift girl from Subtle Tiger. I seen you around." He was breathing shallowly and his eyes trembled, perhaps blinking back tears.

"You had somebody on that ship, the one we talked about?" she asked.

"I dunno." He trembled. "I—I hope not. A navigator."

Suddenly, irrationally, Cheena was certain that his sailor was Daryn too, that Daryn had had two lovers in the port. But then he continued, "He shipped out on *Singapore,*" and she knew it wasn't Daryn after all.

A spray of relief washed over Cheena, although she knew it had been silly for her to have thought Daryn had two lovers in port. When would he have had time?

"—but you know how sailors are. He said he'd be back to me on the next ship this direction, and, and if *Hes*—if that ship was coming inbound. . . ."

She put her arm around Tayo. "He's okay. He wouldn't be on that ship, I'm sure of it."

Tayo chewed his lip, but he seemed more cheerful. "Are you sure?"

Cheena nodded sagely, although she knew no such thing. "Positive."

When a ship comes to disaster at a wormhole, the wreckage sprays through both time and space. Cheena didn't even know when *Hesperia* had wrecked, possibly years or even centuries in the future. She held on to that thought.

And another ship came in, not through the Dorado wormhole, but via Camino Estrella, the smallest of the three wormholes, one that led toward an old, rich cluster of worlds in the Orion arm. It would stay at the port for three days, letting its crew relax, and then depart through Dorado for the other side of the galaxy.

And there was nothing for it but to prepare for the arrival of the sailors. With a ship coming into port, Patryos could not spare her, and there was no place at the port for a person without a job. But when her shift ended, she drifted over to the maintenance port, wordlessly waiting for them to post names of the bodies.

Nothing.

Tayo, the boy from the downside bar, dropped in at the beginning of her next shift and updated her with the latest gossip from the maintenance investigation. They had finished gathering the pieces, he told her, and had gathered enough to date the wreck. It was very nearly contemporal, he told her, and her heart suddenly chilled.

"Past or future?" she said.

"Two hundred hours pastward of standard," he told her. "They said."

Eight days. She did a quick calculation in her head. Right now, through the Dorado wormhole mouth, the port stood fifty-two days pastward of Viadei mouth, and Viadei was forty days in the future of Standard. So . . . if the mouths had not drifted further apart, and if *Hesperia* had taken the straightforward loop, and not some strange path through—the wreckage came from six days into their future.

Everybody at the port would be doing the same calculations, she knew. "How about your sailor?" Cheena asked, but from the radiance of Tayo's face, she already knew the answer.

"He went out via Dorado."

And so he was almost certainly safe, she thought, unless he took a very long passage pastward. Dorado opened fifty-two days futureward. Not quite impossible, if he took a long-enough loop, but unlikely enough that Tayo could consider his lover safe. Cheena had no such consolation; she knew that Dari had crewed the doomed ship.

Tayo looked up. "Thought you might want to know the latest," he said. "Sorry, but I gotta get to the hall. Sailors will be arriving in maybe an hour, and the boss wants me on the floor."

She nodded. "Give 'em hell," she said.

Tayo looked at her. "You going to be okay?"

"Sure." She smiled. "I'm fine."

Cheena went back to cleaning the bar, went back to hating herself. She had kicked Daryn out, called him a two-timing bastard, and worse; told him that he didn't love her. Daryn had protested, tried to soothe her, but the one thing he didn't say was that what she had heard was wrong.

It was another sailor who told her, a sailor she didn't know, who had remarked that he wished he was as lucky with women as Daryn. "Who?" she had asked, although in her heart she knew. "Daryn Bey," the sailor had said. "Lucky bastard has a wife in every port!"

"Excuse me," she had told him, "I'll be back in a moment." She had put on a modest dress and gone upspin, gone into a bar near officer's quarters that she knew he would never frequent. "I'm looking for Daryn Bey," she told a man at the bar. "I've got a message sent from his wife in Pskov-port. Anybody know him?"

"A message from Karina?" one of the officers at the bar asked. "She only saw him two days ago, why would she have a message?"

"That Daryn," one of the officers said, shaking his head. "I wonder how he keeps them all straight?"

She had been in no mind to listen. She went back and threw his clothes out of her apartment, scattered his books and papers and simulation disks down the corridor with a savage glee. Then she bolted the door and refused to listen to his pounding or shouted apologies. Later, she heard, he had shipped out on the *Hesperia,* and she had felt glad that he was gone.

She was still cleaning bar when the owner Patryos came in. "You going to be okay?" he asked.

It was the same thing Tayo had asked. Cheena nodded, without saying anything.

"I heard that the names are being listed," Patryos said, "up in maintenance."

She turned her head a little toward him, enough to show she was listening.

"You want to go up? I expect the first hour after the sailors start coming in will still be pretty calm." He shrugged. "I can spare you for a little, if you want to go up."

She didn't look up, just shook her head.

"Go!" he told her, and she looked up at him in surprise. "Anybody can see you haven't been worth anything, and you won't be worth anything until you know for certain. One way or the other."

He lowered his voice, and said, more calmly, "One way or the other, it's better to know. Take it from me. Go."

Cheena nodded, dropped her rag on the bar, and left.

She knew where to go in the maintenance quarter, although she had never had any reason to go there. Everybody knew. Behind the door was a desk, and behind the desk a door. Sitting at the desk was a single maintenance man. She came up to him, and said quietly, "Daryn Bey."

His eyes flickered. "Relationship?"

"I'm his downspin wife." It was a marriage that was only recognized within the boundaries of the port, but a fully legal one. The maintenance man looked away for a moment, and then said, "I'm sorry." He paused for a moment, and then asked, "Would you like to see him?"

She nodded, and the maintenance man gestured toward the door behind him.

The room was cold. Death is cold, she thought. She was alone, and wondered what to do. A second maintenance man appeared through another door, and gestured to her to follow. This close to spin axis, gravity was light, and he moved in an eerie, slow-motion bounce. She almost floated behind him, her feet nearly useless. She wasn't used to low gravity.

He stopped at a pilot's chair. No, Daryn wasn't a pilot, she thought, this is the wrong man, and then she saw him.

The maintenance man withdrew, and she stared into Daryn's face.

Vacuum hematoma had been hard on him, and he looked like he had been beaten by a band of thugs. His eyes were closed. The tattoos still glowed, faintly, and that was the worst thing of all, that his tattoos still were alive, and Daryn wasn't.

She reached out and put her fingertips against his cheek with a feather's touch, stroking along his jawline with a single finger. Suddenly, irrationally, she was angry at him. She wanted to tell him how inconsiderate he was, how selfish and idiotic and, and, and—but he was not listening. He was never going to listen.

The anger helped her to keep from crying.

* * *

By the time she returned to the Subtle Tiger, knots of sailors were walking upspin and downspin the corridors, talking and sometimes singing, dropping into a bar for a moment to see if it felt like a place to spend the rest of the shift, and then moving on, or staying for a drink. She passed a ferret crew going upspin toward the docks. The ferrets, slender and lithe as snakes with legs, squirmed in their cages, nearly insane with excitement over the prospect of being set free on the just-docked ship to hunt for stowaway rats.

She took over the bar from Patryos, serving drinks in a daze, unable to think of any quick responses to the double entendres and light-hearted suggestions offered by the sailors. Most of them knew that she had a sailor husband, though, and didn't press her very hard, and of course they wouldn't know that he had been in the wreck.

In fact, none of them would even know about the wreck yet; unless they had transferred across through an uptime wormhole, it was still in their future, and the port workers would be careful not to say anything that would cause a catastrophe. An incipient contradiction due to a loop in history would close the wormhole. A little information can leak from the future into the past, but history must be consistent. If enough information leaks downtime to threaten an inconsistency, the offending wormhole connection can snap.

The port circled the wormhole cluster, light-years from any star. If their passage to the rest of civilization by the wormhole connection failed, it would be a thousand years of slower-than-light travel to reach the fringes of civilization. So the port crew did not need to be reminded to avoid incipient contradiction; it was as natural to them as manufacturing oxygen.

Slowly, the banter and the routine of serving elevated Cheena's mood. One of the sailors asked to buy her a drink, and she accepted it and drank philosophically. It was hard to stay gloomy when liquor and florins were flowing so freely. She had kicked him out, after all; he was nothing to her. She could replace him any night from any of a dozen eager suitors—maybe even this one, if he was as nice as he seemed.

And the bar was suddenly especially hectic, with a dozen sailors asking for drinks at once, and half of them asking for more than that, and two more singing a rather clever duet she hadn't heard before, a song about a navigator who kept a pet mouse in the front of his pants, with the heavyset sailor singing the mouse's part in a squeaky falsetto. She was busy smiling and serving and taking orders, so it wasn't surprising at all that she didn't see him come in. He was quiet, after all, and took a seat at the bar and waited for her to come to him.

Daryn.

She was so surprised that she started to drop the beer she was holding, and caught it with a jerk, spilling a great splash of it across the bar and half across two sailors. The one she'd caught full-on jumped up, staring down at his splattered uniform. The one sitting with him started to laugh. "Now you've had your baptism in beer, and the night is still young, say now," he said. After a moment the one who had been splashed started to laugh as well. "A good sign, then, wouldn't you say?"

"Sorry, there," she said, bringing them both fresh drinks, waving her hand when they started to pay. "The last one was on you, so this one's on the house," she told them, and they both laughed. All the time she carefully avoided looking toward Daryn.

Daryn.

He sat at the end of the bar, drinking the beer that the other barmaid had brought him, not gesturing for her to come over, but smugly aware that, sooner or later, she would. He said something that made the other barmaid giggle, and she wondered what it might have been. She served a few of the other sailors, and then, knowing that sooner or later she would, she went to talk to him.

"Alive, alive," she said. It was barely more than a whisper.

"Myself, in the flesh," Daryn said. He smiled his huge, goonish smile. "Surprised to see me, yes?"

"How can you be here?" she said. "I thought you were on—on that ship."

"*Hesperia?* Yeah. But we docked alongside *Lictor* at Tarrytown-port, and *Lictor* was short a navigator, and *Hesperia* could spare me for a bit, and I knew that *Lictor* was heading to stop here, and I'd have a chance to see you, and—" he spread his hands. "I can't stay."

"You can't stay," she repeated.

"No, I have to sail with *Lictor,* so I can catch up with *Hesperia* at Dulcinea." He looked up at her. She was still standing stupidly there over him. "But I had to see you."

"You had to see me," she repeated slowly, as if trying to understand.

"I had to tell you," he said. "You have to know that you're the only one."

You are such a sweet liar, she thought, how can I trust you? But his smile brought back a thousand memories of time they had spent together, and it was like a sweet ache in her throat. "The only one," she repeated, still completely unable to think of any words of her own to say.

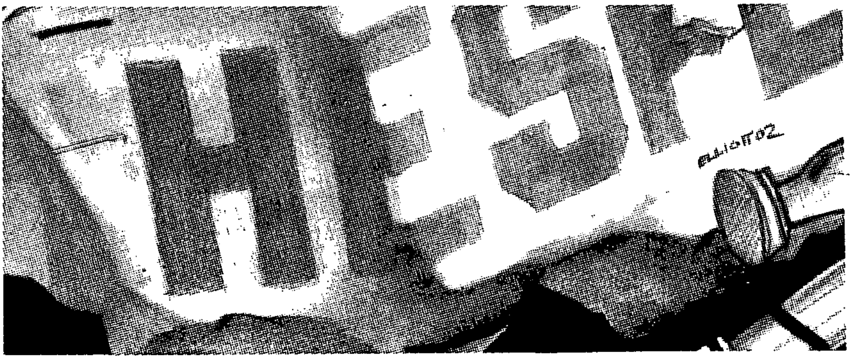
"You aren't still angry, are you?" he said. "Please, tell me you're not still angry. You know that you've always been the only one."

Morning came to the second-shift, and she propped her head up on one elbow to look across the bed at him. The glow of his tattoos cast a mottled pattern of soft light against the walls and ceiling.

Daryn awoke, rolled over, and looked at her. He smiled, a radiant smile, with his eyes still smoky with sleep, and leaned forward to kiss her. "There will be no other," he said. "This time I promise."

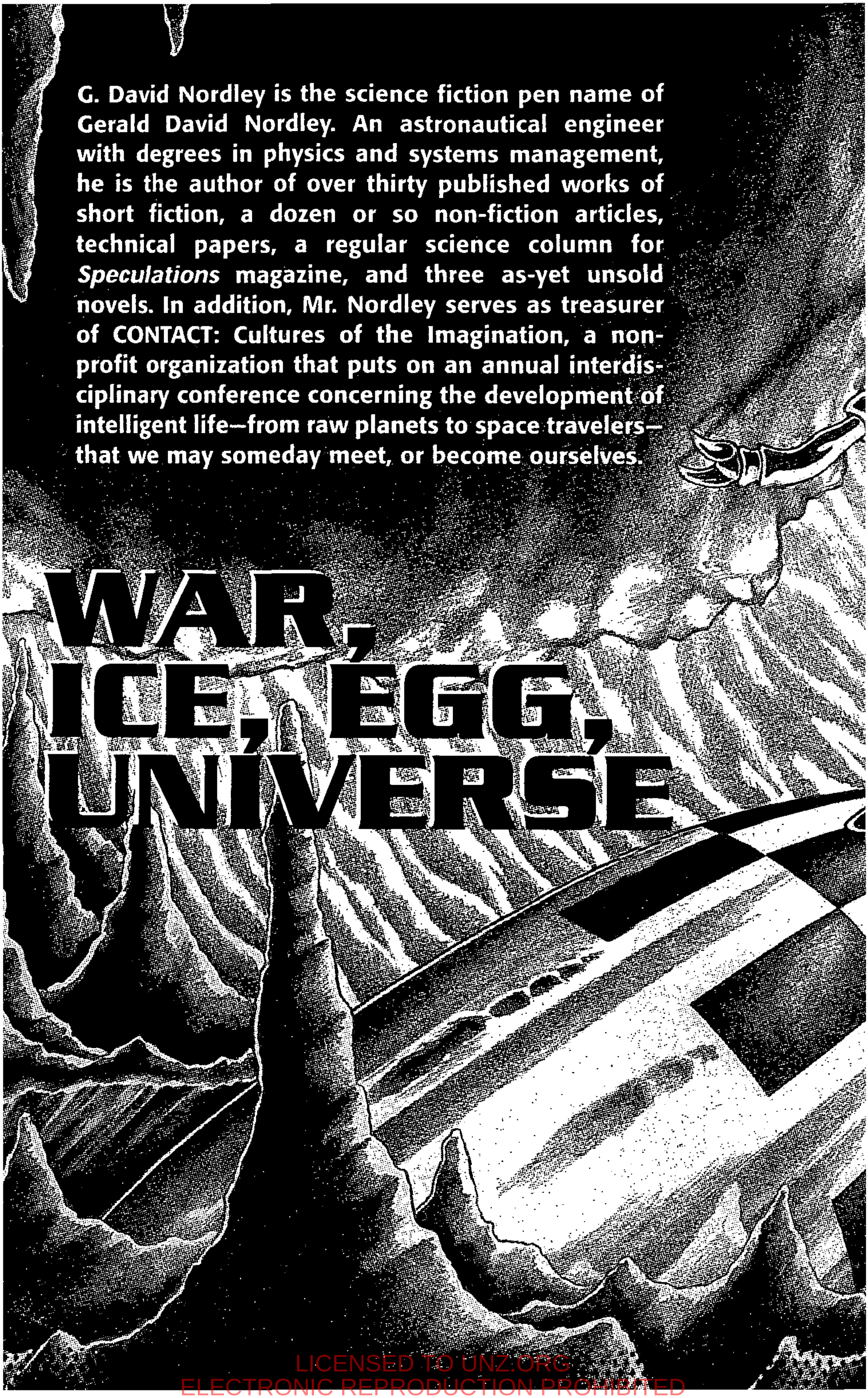
She kissed him, her eyes closed, knowing that it would be the last kiss they would ever have.

"I know," she said. ○



G. David Nordley is the science fiction pen name of Gerald David Nordley. An astronautical engineer with degrees in physics and systems management, he is the author of over thirty published works of short fiction, a dozen or so non-fiction articles, technical papers, a regular science column for *Speculations* magazine, and three as-yet unsold novels. In addition, Mr. Nordley serves as treasurer of CONTACT: Cultures of the Imagination, a non-profit organization that puts on an annual interdisciplinary conference concerning the development of intelligent life—from raw planets to space travelers—that we may someday meet, or become ourselves.

WAR, ICE, EGG, UNIVERSE



G. David Nordley

I shall start four cycles before the Westerian invasion, the threat of which I then appreciated only as a justification of support for my research into the source of lightstone.

My third-molting-father, Professor Colonel Threeclickson, had come to express his worries about my slow field work in the deepest part of the long valley that gave our land its name, some eight-to-the-fourth body lengths from the University. His fronds drooped toward the ice and he glowed with white noise as all the hairs on his four long legs vibrated in disharmony. Reaching over with a long arm, he lifted up my head.

"Up there," he said, waving his three remaining arms upward. "The answers lie above."

I could not nod agreement with his pincer under my mandible like that, but managed a polite "Yes, sir," from my spiracles.

He let go and I brought my head down again, but only to the level of my upper thorax.

Threeclickson's spiracle covers clapped. "You are always staring at the ice, Loudpincers. Elevate your ambitions."

I bent my neck up again so my head was at the level of his. "Sir. The ice is where we find the lightstone that takes our instruments up there. If we knew where lightstone came from, we might be able to find more of it, and, perhaps, even ascend ourselves, without dying first."

Threeclickson seemed mollified; the hair on his legs settled down and assumed its normal texture. "Your logic is right, but be wary of becoming too indirect. You know that Professor General Icescriber has proposed building an ascent sphere of ice?"

I shivered with the thought of such an adventure as well as from lingering fears from larvahood myths about the eater of disobedient souls in the land of the dead. "Yes . . . uh, sir . . . I've seen drawings of it. It's one arm thick all around with polished areas to see through; it should resist crushing and let us get really high—if we can find or make enough lightstone to lift it."

Threeclickson laughed with staccato slaps of his spiracle valves, which made his upper thorax sparkle. "I rather supposed that would appeal to you. At my third molting, I shared that ambition. There is some promising related research that, however, must be held among the staff for now. . . ." He trailed off. "But the water above is not friendly to life. As a body goes up, its heavy parts are compressed and we cannot breathe easily above eight to the fifth body-lengths. It is, after all, the realm of the dead. . . . Well, Loudpincers, have you looked at the latest lightstone research?"

"Goodphaser thinks it works its way up from further below."

The professor huffed currents out of his spiracles. "So much is obvious."

"Softtipspawn has a theory that lightstone might be connected with the periodicity of icecover plant growth," I ventured.

"Pure speculation. I know she is a friend of yours, but biology isn't Softtipspawn's field. Major Lecturer Tightpincers *is* a zoologist, however, and she is pretty sure that lightstone is excreted by an unknown species of giant iceworm—little iceworms have long been known to feed on concentrated minerals released from warmfall water as it freezes."

I tried to imagine a huge worm tunneling through solid ice and couldn't, so I maintained a respectful silence. Threeclickson and Tightpincers were thick, and if rumors were to be believed, might spawn together next feasting

"I can tell you don't think much of that one," Threeclickson said, accusingly.

"Sir . . . it's very difficult to observe anything in a warmfall," I said. "The warm water makes one slow or even unconscious."

"She surrounds herself with ice before going in and is usually conscious for long enough to note what happens. I must admit there has been a problem getting others to replicate this. Well, what else have you found out?"

I recited my research. "Lightstone comes in many varieties and varies in lifting power per unit volume, though it takes a sensitive balance to see the difference. Lightstone with the most inertia lifts most strongly. Some people have timed the rise of lightstones through the ice to the surface by protecting the surface over them from variations and taking measurements every feast cycle. They drift upward at varying rates, usually less than one over eight-to-the-fourth body lengths in a cycle."

"Brightpincers and Loudlegs," Threeclickson replied. "They're visiting from Great Warmfall. And they've also shown that solutions of ground lightstone are the same as found in iceworm excrement, by the way. Well, what conclusion do you draw from all of this?"

I hesitated, not sure I should tell Threeclickson all my cosmological speculations, but vanity spoke. "I think they might be concentrated by living things, not living *in* the ice, but rather on the other side of the ice. There could be another shell of water beyond this one, further out from the center. Like an egg of ice with many shells. But that's just speculation," I hurried to add.

"And not original. There is a long history of stories about beings from the underworld. Unfortunately, they are tales to make larva more attentive."

I opened my pincers. I could not help that. "I need more data. Since I've covered almost all of the base's allocated research area, the only way to get more is to go, well, deeper. Lightstone comes from somewhere."

Another spiracle flap. "Well, I haven't seen any giant iceworms either, so maybe. But be careful who you say that to; I would not want to see my moltson ridiculed." He waved his fronds. "Going down to go up! The Mystical Church would love it. But your logic seems unassailable."

He waved an arm toward the west; a dim glow of noise marked the direction of our neighbors in Crossvalleys. "I wish our Long Valley were likewise unassailable. But Highfronds' Westerian Empire draws nearer. They are absorbing Crossvalleys—see the glow of their war machines? We are getting refugees daily."

I shivered. Crossvalleys was but a thirty-cycle hike from Long Valley, and only Lushole lay between them and us. "We are no match for the empire in population," I said.

"Aye, but do we just allow ourselves to be eaten or enslaved? Our one hope lies in better weapons, and that means better research. So, do your research, but keep in mind the needs of defense; the research must pay off soon, Loudpincers. There is not much time. Goodcycle."

"Goodcycle, sir."

He scrabbled off among the hillocks and ridges of the research field, lit in sparkles by the myriad sounds of nature. Pompous as he was, it was good of him to journey so far and take so much time with me. The bottom of Long Valley was very isolated; it was too prone to enervating warmfalls to be settled, so he'd come some distance from the comforts of civilization.

I wanted to find more lightstone, of course, but that was only part of the ancient question that had gripped my imagination. How deep could I go? The bottom of Long Valley's eponymous rift was by all accounts as far from the center and the land of the dead as one could get in the ice. It was kept clear by a periodic warmfall, so I had a good head start.

What was below the ice? Theology had long held that our universe was a bubble in an infinite volume of ice, and academic cosmology had no better suggestion, so the question itself was a minor heresy, but priests did not have the standing in Long Valley they had in Westeria. Some radical geometers had offered the idea that the ice was finite but unbounded; if I could dig down forever I would end up coming up on the other side of the universe, just as if one kept going west with the current from Long Valley, one would eventually reach Long Valley from the east side. That closure was of two dimensions and required three, the greater closure would be in three dimensions and require four.

The idea made my head ache. I didn't believe it, anyway. Something came up through the ice to make the plants grow. That something did not come down from the center, because you could cover the plants and they would still grow. And they would still grow according to the regular cycle. To me, this meant that something different had to lie below, something that changed with the cycle.

I took my prize lightstone axe from my thorax pouch and carefully tied its tether to my abdomen belt against its tendency to fly upward. I followed the path back to my pit, contemplating the universe. Icesplitter's model of weight held that water pushed things less dense than it out from the center, giving us weight and keeping us firmly on the ice.

It seemed to me that unless there were something pushing the ice toward the center, the universe would explode. Therefore, there should be a layer of water, or something, beyond this one. Perhaps more. The "layer" that lay beyond our layer must generate, or at least transmit, lightstones. And if I could find it, my people might have what they needed to defend themselves.

I checked my surface stores and rappelled down a knotted rope to begin again my painstaking routine: Thirty swings of the axe, then wait for my body to recharge itself as the ice chips settled back down. Then do it again. It took me a demicycle to lower the pit floor by a quarter arm.

With each new level reached, I gently laid my ear fronds on the hard, cold ice-viewer, chirped a command to my vibrators, and watched for the dull fuzzy spots that would signify lightstones.

A quarter-cycle went by. Then I noticed something strange; not a dark, hard reflection spot that would signify a lightstone, but rather that half of my field of view seemed dimmer than the other half.

I raised my body on all four legs and directed my attention to the viewer itself. Designed from Valleyscraper's sonic wave theory of vision, it had eight-squared cones, each widest at the bottom and narrowing to a small plunger and plate arrangement at the top, on which one laid one's fronds. It multiplied by two times eight squared the slight motion of the waves emerging from ice in contact with the wide ends of the cones to those fronds in contact with the narrow ends.

The fluid in each cone was under a slight pressure, and if it leaked, the amplification would be somewhat less intense; and I would perceive that part of the wave front as being dimmer. But I could not think of anything that would cause half the cones on one side to leak.

The viewer was anchored to the ice by a heavy tube frame; if the pressure on one side were not the same as on the other, there might be a difference. With effort, I braced all my legs and lifted the viewer off the ice; it did not seem unbalanced.

Still, I examined it at a wide range of frequencies—and nothing looked wrong.

I might, I realized, be sounding the edge of a huge object buried deep beneath the ice, its faintness due to depth, or softness. I went to the viewer and chirped for illumination. The dark half was still there. I moved the viewer slightly and chirped again. The edge stayed where it was—so it lay in the ice and not in the viewer.

Was it, I wondered, the edge of a physical change in the ice at that level? A field of soft ice? I thought I would have to expand my pit to test that hypothesis, and that would take cycles of work. But as I went to move the viewer to make room for digging, I tilted it and had an inspiration.

Suppose I dug my pit with a slightly concave bottom? I could move the viewer around scanning through the ice at various angles, looking thus in a different direction in each place and greatly expanding my field of view. I hastened to work.

It took another quarter cycle, but there was definitely something down there. It was huge, it was distant. It, I dreamed, might be a giant lightstone, more than enough for thousands of weapons. But I would never get to it before the Westerian armies got to us; I would need help to dig down quickly. I went off to find Threeclickson, snacking on local iceweed as I went; no time to stop for a meal now!

I found Threeclickson in his office with General Councilor Sharpfronds and four others.

"Loudpincers! Just the young body we need. You have saved me the trouble of sending for you. You know the general. I would like you to meet as well Prof. Lieutenant Farfronds, Mr. Crushpincers, Mr. Eightfold Longtail, and Goodmother Quickfronds."

"Goodcycle, all. Need? I have just come to tell you I've found something of potentially immense value, what is possibly a huge lightstone buried deep in the ice."

Spiracles flapped in humor. "What would you say, Loudpincers, if I told you we have gained access to where we shall not have to dig for lightstone?"

I waved my pincers upward in a questioning posture.

"Precisely. If you come into the courtyard, we shall show you. Are you curious?"

I decided to set my news aside for a moment; I had delivered it and need not argue or expound on its importance, and the possibility of a journey to the center excited me. I nodded agreement and followed the colonel and the general.

The university offices form a hexagon, the center of which is an open area twenty bodies across. Much of the military development that we would rather others not hear was done there, and as such an invitation to enter was a mark of great trust—something I even more greatly appreciated as I approached its entrance, secured by three military personnel and two sets of woven stiffplant doors.

We negotiated this gauntlet one by one and found in the open space beyond, with sonic beams illuminating it from all sides, a vast sphere, fully three bodies across. A windlass even larger than it was stood next to it. What must have been a small fortune in netterbug web fiber was wound around it.

"Young Loudpincers," Sharpfronds said. "There is a steady rain of lightstone skyward; it all must collect in the center. But how far is that? Now Prof. Major Crossfronds has received an echo from his instrument."

"An echo?" Were there layers above as well as layers below?

"Almost three times eight-to-the-fifth bodies above us is a reflection."

"Not a temperature ghost," Threeclickson added. "Something real that does not move. The center itself, or at least something that might stop lightstone on its way to the center."

I looked at the sphere and the windlass. Then I spotted its propulsion system: a small net filled with a fortune's fortune of lightstone waving gently in the current above the sphere, straining to drag the sphere upward.

My leg hair vibrated in spite of myself. "You mean to go where the dead go to reclaim the lightstone?"

"Exactly," Threeclickson said. "And you must come too."

It was said gently, as if in invitation, but it was an invitation, I realized, that I dared not refuse now that I knew what technology would accomplish this trip. Besides, if I had been told everything with a free choice, I would have begged to go.

"When?" was all I asked.

They were all still for a moment, and in the dark silence, the thumps of distant war machines made the horizon glow. Threeclickson waved an arm in Sharpfronds' direction.

"There must be no delay," Sharpfronds said. "We go as soon as provisions are loaded, in about thirty clicks. What you need will be on board, so there is no need to gather anything; however, I should not dismiss the danger."

He cupped his fronds toward each of us in turn. No one wavered that I could sense.

"Good. If you have affairs, you, I, and all of us should do what we can in the time we have to resolve them. There are sonotube cubicles around the perimeter that you may use."

"You are going yourself, General?" I asked, not knowing then how impertinent that was.

Sharpfronds turned, then waved an arm, dismissing any idea of offense. "My style is to lead from the front, Loudpincers."

With that, he departed.

I stood and looked in wonder at the sphere for a few clicks, then proceeded to the perimeter.

From the standpoint of few affairs to complicate things, they had chosen me well. I had only my eggmother to tell and my project for an inheritance. Eggmother was away, so I called the university recorder, who took my message for her and recorded my will. For the project, there was nobody but Softtipspawn. Because she was an early teacher of mine, our relationship was still a bit spiny and for her to consider spawning with a student was to mix things better not mixed. But I would be a student no longer in a few cycles, and her eggs carried an intelligent heritage. We were of similar age, three moltings each, and this was thought best for reproductive success. If she would not get my seed, at least she would get my data; that in itself was seed for something.

The next step was the hardest. One wants, more than anything, for one's existence to have meaning. My discovery would, perhaps, cause my name to be immortal. But if it fell into the hands of the Westerian empire, every being in the universe would be in jeopardy. With great reluctance, I told the recorder to place my will among the things that would be destroyed should the university fall to the empire. Not until that moment had the impending invasion really hit home.

A horn pulsed deep long waves. Our departure signal, probably, though I had not been told that. I left the cubicle and headed for the sphere. There, I was directed toward a hinged section of the sphere by Mr. Crushpincers. He was, despite his name, quite small.

"It is a hatch. Pull it outward," he said.

I did as he said and it opened easily, almost pulling itself from my fingers as it swung hard toward the ice. "It seems too heavy to be strong," I said.

"It has many layers of fiber joined with a glue made from iceworm skin. It is both stronger than ice itself and heavier; this is a secret that you must keep now."

I moved the door back and forth, thinking about how strong and heavy it was. "If we have this, what do we need of lightstone weapons?"

Crushpincers clicked with good humor. "Not as much, certainly. But we need lightstone for much more than for weapons; we need the lightstone to fly over the enemy. A lightstone-levitated gondola with four archers could neutralize an eight of eights of infantry, if even a quarter of their load of poisoned daggershells found the target."

The instinct of a daggershell was to seek the ice at as high a velocity as its water jets would take it, its hard, notched shell penetrating deep enough to hold it until its next molting. They could stab completely through a thorax and still stick in the ice below. Many cycles ago, I had come close to being under one, and the wonder and fear at hearing its bright landing so close to me was one of my strongest youthful memories. To use such a thing as a weapon spoke of our desperation. To actually swim above the ice levitated by lightstone fired my imagination.

"What a project! Are you coming along?"

"No, someone must mind the windlass, I fear. Now you're the last, so on your way."

I nodded and entered the sphere. My companions were on benches against the side around the equator of the sphere, each with a portal that had been invisible from outside. Cabinets, no doubt filled with the equipment we would need, lay under the benches. I took the remaining free bench and looked around.

I felt I had entered some new and strange universe. The inner wall was smooth to even the highest frequencies, like an egg. Apart from the benches, the cabinets, and a cylinder covered by what sounded to be a taut drumhead at the very bottom, it all seemed very stark and featureless.

"We ascend," Sharpfronds said. Only the slightest motion betrayed the truth of what he said.

"Loudpincers," Goodmother Quickfronds said. "I have prepared something for us all to take that will ameliorate the effects of the rising pressure. I assure you, despite what it tastes like, that it will not harm you—I have taken it several times myself in pressure chamber tests."

"Pressure chamber?" I had never heard of such a thing.

Quickfronds raised her fronds in pleasure. "It lies beneath the north side of the University. We carved a cylindrical room, then froze a plug that, after some grinding, matches the opening almost exactly. The 'almost' we take care of with a caulking paste of crushed iceweed. A great screw can push the plug down, compressing the water beneath it."

I made postures of admiration. "This must have been in work for some time."

Sharpfronds clicked his spiracles. "It has. Fortunately. Dr. Quickfronds is our greatest expert on this, and we trust her to keep us alive. Now let me show you another wonder. Crushpincers?"

"Yes, General?" The voice had a tinny quality, missing some of its lower register glow, but it was clear and understandable. But where was Crushpincers?

"How far?" Sharpfronds asked, directing his voice to the drum.

"Two eight cubed and six bodies of line out," the voice answered, lighting up the drumhead.

Crushpincers must be outside the sphere, I thought. Observing the play out of the tether line. But, I remembered, the reel was on the ice, and we'd been rising for some time. We'd have gone through the reflecting layer beyond which unaided acoustic senses could not see. So how?

Sharpfronds' leg hair vibrated in excitement. "Good show. Loudpincers and everyone, there is enough tension in the line to carry the sounds we make, as amplified by the big drum head you see in the center. Another drum is attached to the line by small lightstone rollers, so that Crushpincers' voice can vibrate the line and carry up to us. The same works in reverse."

"Crushpincers is still on the ice?" I said, half asking, half stating.

"Yes," Sharpfronds said.

I could think of nothing to say. The implications of being far, far above the ice and still being able to talk to those below ran riot in my mind. Speaking tubes ran only a few eights of body lengths before the voice faded to inaudibility. Beyond that, messengers had been needed.

We rose and rose. There was no way to keep track of cycles, save through the voice of Crushpincers or one of his students from the drum below; but they told us that two had passed. Dr. Threeclickson said, based on his geometrical analysis, that we had ascended a hundredth of the distance to the mathematical center. Sharpfronds said we should reach something soon; occasional holes in the reflecting layer had revealed another reflecting layer at about this distance.

We were all feeling somewhat ill. The pressure, Goodmother Quickfronds said, was compressing the heavy fluid cavities in our bodies, interfering with our ability to produce energy. We would be able to tolerate it based on the pressure chamber experiments, for quite some additional distance. But it would be uncomfortable until we got used to it.

I felt tired, a little woozy, and lighter and lighter. I began holding onto my shelf instinctively, as if to keep from floating off it as if I were made of lightstone. The very physics of my body was changing; it was as if I was being drawn to the land of the dead. Should we really be doing this? I wondered.

To keep my mind off my innards, I tried discussing cosmology with Quickfronds, explaining to her my idea that the universe was like an egg with multiple shells.

"Egg, universe—it's an interesting analogy," she said. "Shells exist to keep out parasites, but allow water and dissolved heavyfluid to enter and nourish the embryonic larva. The larva exist between the shell and the center, which has nourishment, but is not alive. An idea is a bit like an egg, too, I think. It should stay in the shell of one's mind until it is ready to emerge, no sooner, no longer. A real egg has only one shell, Loudpincers, and hatches only once. And before creches and culling, most larva were eaten when hatched. If our universe is like an egg, are we really ready to crack its shell?"

War, ice, egg, universe—individuals were laid, hatched, lived, and died. But everything else seemed to stay the same. "For how long have nations risen and fallen, for how long has knowledge been won and lost, how many generations of soldiers have died fighting over the same ice?"

Quickfronds nodded. "For longer than we know. Sometimes a warmfall will expose relics; Steadylegs of Crossvalleys has looked at the distribution and frequency of such finds and thinks warmfalls are less frequent now than when they were deposited, and the ice is on average a few body lengths thicker. But there is no discernible change in these rates for the five and three-eighths great greatcycles for which we have records."

I imagined all my research lost to the Westerian invasion and then, greats of greatcycles later, being duplicated by someone else, only to be lost again.

"What happens to a larva that stays too long in its shell?"

"The worms come, in time. An eggshell is not forever." Quickfronds waved an arm around her, "Our present shell only seems like it. Your analogy of the egg seems to repeat itself on several scales, and both in abstract and concrete. There may be some wisdom in it on how the universe does things."

"Thank you, Goodmother."

She nodded and turned away, signaling the end of conversation. I, too, was having trouble concentrating as what the pressure of the ascent was doing to my body distracted me. On and on we went, and we grew quieter and more unsure. How much cable did Crushpincers have on the reel? I couldn't remember.

If we did not find something soon, I thought, we might be in no shape to do anything with it.

"Comrades," Professor Lieutenant Farfronds called. "Something lies . . ."

The impact came as a surprise, throwing us off our shelves.

". . . ahead of us."

We floated together into a jumble on one side of the sphere. Or the bottom, now, for, pulled however gently, we stayed there. It felt as if up had become down and down, up.

Then, before anyone could even groan in astonishment, the sphere began tilting back and forth, and we slowly rolled as a mass to the top. After much embarrassed and apologetic moving of limbs, we sorted ourselves out into a rough circle around the top.

General Sharpfronds gathered himself, jumped and swam up to the drumhead, and latched on. "Crushpincers!" he bellowed.

There was no response. The sound transmittal system depended on tension, I realized. And now there was none. We rocked slowly, feeling upside down and helpless.

Finally, there was some more rocking and a kind of sucking sound. The motion of the sphere changed, now feeling as if it was tethered again as opposed to sitting on something.

"General? Anyone?" Crushpincers' tinny voice sounded.

"Thank goodness," Mr. Longtail sighed.

"We're here, Crushpincers. We're seemingly, uh, upside down, but everyone seems okay. Ah, Goodmother?"

"It was a gentle crash, we should all be undamaged."

"I'm undamaged," Sharpfronds echoed. Others followed his lead.

"Good." Crushpincers' voice came after a discernible delay. "We noted when the line went slack, but there is some lag since you are so far up. I have had to reel you back a little to restore tension to the tether, but you should still be close to what stopped you. Can you open the top hatch?"

It was at our feet now; top had become bottom.

"We shall attempt that presently. Thank you, Crushpincers." Sharpfronds waved a limb at us. "It seems we have arrived."

"We should gather the lightstone quickly," Goodmother Quickfronds said. "I don't know how long our physiology will hold up under this pressure."

Actually, I felt somewhat better than I had earlier. Perhaps my body was adapting to the new conditions. I was conscious of, well, slowness, in my thought and movements. But quality seemed unaffected.

Sharpfronds nodded. "Loudpincers, Farfronds, unscrew the latches. Longtail, wind up the beacon."

We all jumped to our tasks, though I wanted a look at the beacon. Windup implied a spring of some sort; I had never heard of a spring driving a beacon before. The threat of the Empire had made the University busy indeed, and I found myself very curious about things that, apparently, no longer were to be hidden from me.

But first things first. I went to work on my latches. As I did so, the sphere began to develop a slight monotonic glow; the beacon, I presumed. Soon the hatch swung aside, and revealed "below" us a vast, smooth, featureless plain starkly lit by the tone of the beacon. I didn't see anything at all that looked like lightstone.

"So that is the land of the dead. Not quite what we were told before molting, is it?" General Sharpfronds said. "No eater of souls, no pleasure gardens, and no piles of lightstone, either."

"No, sir," said Farfronds. "It looks like another layer of ice, though darker, less reflective."

"The multishell cosmology," Professor Colonel Threeclickson said. "When the lightstone hits it, it must work its way through to another layer of water, perhaps one that is inhabited. As for the darkness, we have no idea what our layer looks like on the other side. It could be a debris field."

My leg hair wilted. That was my idea and Threeclickson had stolen it. I felt vindicated but disappointed that I had not gotten any recognition.

"And what happens to the dead?" Longtail asked. "I have a bad feeling about this. It is not what we expected. If we cannot see any lightstone, perhaps we should go home."

Silence greeted that remark. Not finding the lightstone made the expedition a failure and could have grave consequences for our nation.

"The area of this land must be over 80 percent of the area of our land." Professor Threeclickson said. "We can only see a small portion. Where do the warmfalls come from? We should take more of a look."

"You are welcome to stick your head in the crack," said Longtail.

"I volunteer," said Lieutenant Farfronds.

"Thank you," General Sharpfronds said. "But I would like one experienced soldier to remain aboard the sphere at all times. Since I shall have to make the decision of what to do, I shall get the information first hand. Your orders, Farfronds, are that if anything happens to me, have Crushpincers pull you all back. You hear that, Crushpincers?"

"I hear, General. May I suggest that, in that event, we pull back a little way and reevaluate. We would not want to lose you."

"Oh, bother that. Very well. Pull back a little and, Farfronds, you do as you think best. But should I meet my end up or down there, whatever it is, honor me by making sure that nobody else meets a similar end."

"Sir!" Farfronds replied.

"Enough discussion. Ware above, ah, below!"

Sharpfronds let go of the communications drum and dropped slowly through the hatch and onto the plain. So far, so good. But then he kept going *into* it, though very slowly.

"Soft!" he said. "Like so much rotten tissue. Slime. I'm sinking into it! Totally unexpected! Throw me a line, quickly."

Farfronds leaped up to the cabinets below our benches and clinging with three arms managed to open a cabinet with one, extract a coil of rope, and toss it down to me. "Loudpincers! Tie an end to the latch and throw the coil down at Sharpfronds."

A glance down at Sharpfronds showed only his head and fronds still echoing above the surface. His voice holes were beneath it, but he had two of his arms just on the surface, waving slowly back and forth, trying to swim in it, it seemed. He could keep that up only so long, I realized. He was suffocating.

I glanced up in time to catch the coil of rope, but instead of just throwing it down to Sharpfronds, I followed the coil and lowered myself claw by claw toward the surface. The exertion made me incredibly tired.

General Sharpfronds had vanished entirely just as I reached the surface; there was nothing to show that he'd caught the coil. I began to lower myself into the surface, head first, to keep my spiracles above for as long as possible. Voices called to me to stop, but there was no time to argue.

The material was viscous, clinging, and dense. I tried chirping to see, but the viscous mass seemed to absorb every sound I made; it was as black as deafness.

I reached as far down as I could with my upper arm, feeling my energy wane as the substance began to block my spiracles. I felt something, and grabbed and held. It could be Sharpfronds' limb. Or something else entirely. Something long dead.

Shuddering, I held on and began to back. Slowly at first, as the holding and the motion took every available bit of energy I had. But as more of my spiracles emerged into clean water above, I felt a little more strength.

Then the rope started to move up. My comrades must have seen me try to back out, I thought, and helped by pulling the line in.

My head broke into the water and I started rising faster. I shook myself back and forth to try to clean my fronds and vision returned. What I had in my hand was definitely someone's wrist, just inward of his pincers.

I looked around for a moment as my flapping spiracles desperately tried to restore my energy. In the monotonic glow of our beacon, every bump in the surface cast long, exaggerated shadows. One of the shadows moved, undulating toward me. I had to stare for seconds to be sure of what I was seeing; the rise in the surface was huge.

Suddenly, the slime fell away and a great round hole slowly broached above the slime, then waved right and left before descending again. The hole appeared to be a mouth with six huge triangular teeth around its rim, pointing inward. The Eater of Souls, I thought—mythology come real.

Clinging with both hind arms, I reached down into the slime with my other arm, grabbed my prize, and pulled. With the group above pulling as well, an entire arm emerged; pincer, wrist and up to the second joint.

The huge surface undulations moved nearer. Not enough time, I thought, not nearly enough time. But I continued to pull. Suddenly, the strain on my arms seemed to double and I had to cling, both to the rope and the arm, with all my remaining strength. The eater? One slice of those teeth and I would be left holding only an arm, if that.

But before I let go, I saw that the arm I held was emerging rapidly now; we were being pulled faster from above. The winch, I thought. They must have told Crushpincers to reel us in. The general—for it was he—began to emerge. He came clear; thorax, head, abdomen, and his limbs trailing limply, but still in one piece, the muck streaming away from his body.

The slime swelled up next to us and a great arch, the upper part of the eater's mouth, broke the surface and rose inexorably up beside us. Slime fell away from two, then three huge triangular teeth.

This would be very close, but the general's body was free now and we were rising even more rapidly than the eater's mouth. Maybe it would miss. I freed one hand from the general's arm and got ready to try to bat or push us away. Hopeless, perhaps, but I would not give up.

Then something large and bright fell rapidly from above—incredibly quickly, the speed of its passage creating a brilliant wake behind it. I recognized it; it was our bag of lightstone, the one on top of the sphere that suspended us up/down from the ice. What a thing to see lightstone as *falling*, But that was the current perspective.

It struck the eaater's mouth just a body length from me and cracked it, caving it in between two huge triangular teeth. The mouth tore open, its parts waving uselessly. Bright, dense material began to flow from the wound toward the center. Then we were above it, and rising (falling?) rapidly with the sphere.

I was pulled into the hatch, still holding the unconscious General Sharpfronds by his arm..

I released him to Goodmother Quickfronds and collapsed near the hatch with my limbs tucked under me, chrysalis style, shaking uncontrollably. My hands, my head, my body had plunged into the remains of others, accumulated over the ages. Even as I lay there, pieces of the dead clung to me. I had sought treasure in their land and they had guarded it well. I had seen the eater of souls itself. I abandoned myself to my shudders, and lost conscious thought.

When I woke, I had been cleaned. Also, I floated; down had become ambiguous again. There was no need to chirp for vision; the hull glowed with many sounds—a sign of a robust slipstream. Were they reeling us back so rapidly? Crushpincers must have an eight of helpers turning the wheel!

Professor Lieutenant Farfronds came over to me and touched me with a limb. It was the gesture of an equal and a friend, and without his saying anything, I realized my status had changed. "The general survives, for now. But we are all in great danger; we have lost our lightstone and our fall toward home is too rapid. There is no tension on the tether. Indeed, it trails behind us now. We shall have to do something desperate, and soon, and we may not survive. I wanted to talk to you a moment first." He raised a pair of limbs. "I speak to you as one who, despite my professor title, has always been more of a military person. I have fought the bandits in the countercurrent reaches, and I have witnessed courage, so I know it when I see it. Some will judge this expedition a failure, for the loss of lightstone. But I think we have found a good and courageous soldier."

"Thank you, sir," was all I could think of saying.

He nodded, touched me again, then swam over to Goodmother Quickfronds and the general.

Some time passed, then Professor Colonel Threeclickson called us to attention, the first time he had said anything for some time. While he was the ranking officer after the incapacitated Sharpfronds, he'd let Lieutenant Farfronds, who must have been far more experienced in emergencies, take charge of details. But apparently there were responsibilities of leadership and rank that one does not duck.

"Companions . . ." He hesitated.

I clenched my pincers. It would, I thought, be so like Threeclickson to make some kind of acerbic, imperious, cautionary speech or lecture now, putting us all on notice. But there was no time for that. I had always feared him more than respected him, and now when a greater fear ruled, I had little confidence in him.

"Companions, if we stay with the sphere until it falls to the ice, we shall be crushed. Therefore, we shall have to abandon it. Lieutenant Farfronds, tell what must be done."

Short and to the point? While his logic remained, the manner did not seem to be that of the Threeclickson I'd known.

Farfronds crawled quickly up to the hatch, then dropped toward the drum, spreading his limbs and fingers as he did so. He did not fall rapidly.

"See," he said. "The more area you present to the water, the slower you fall. And, after a certain amount of time, no matter how long you fall, you do not fall any faster. Our bomb-throwers call this 'terminal velocity.' If you spread yourselves wide enough and so fall slowly enough, you should land on the ice uninjured. You must only have the courage to do it."

Neither I, nor anyone else, had the instincts of a floater or a swimmer. It was our nature to cling to the surface, anchored by our weight, to not be swept away by currents. I grabbed my bench all the more tightly as I listened to what Farfronds said. I saw the glow the walls of our sphere emitted from its too-fast passage and could easily imagine the crunch as it hit.

"How much time?"

I could barely hear that voice, but I recognized it immediately. General Sharpfronds was back with us.

Farfronds raised his upper arms. "Soon, sir. We have no idea of how far back we've come. We could strike at any moment."

"Very well. Open the hatch."

"General, you aren't ready yet. . . ." Goodmother Quickfronds said.

"Am I ready to be crushed?" His voice seemed a bit stronger. "I will lead us out. You will come next."

"Me!" Quickfronds exclaimed.

There was a moment of quiet. Then Sharpfronds said, "I may have need of you when I hit the ice."

There was some nervous clicking of pincers at the general's small joke, but it seemed to break the tension. Farfronds motioned to me, and I joined him in undogging the hatch. But when we were done, we couldn't budge it.

"Pressure," Threeclickson said. "The sphere is at the pressure of high above. We must let it out to open the hatch."

Lieutenant Farfronds scrabbled down from the hatch, reached into the cabinet below his bench, and pulled out a military spear. Then he stabbed the tip directly into the communications drum. The sound of its ripping almost blinded me, and I felt an immediate and terrible discomfort all through my body, as if I were about to explode. Groans filled the sphere, but gradually the pain got less. Also, I suddenly realized I was back to my normal weight, and almost fell from my hand-hold near the hatch. What did pressure have to do with how much I weighed? Compression, I remembered. As my body expanded and gained more volume, it fell more rapidly.

"Loudpincers, the hatch!" Farfronds shouted. I pulled with as much strength as I had, and it opened, grudgingly at first, with a bright hiss of water jetting through the crack. Then it opened more easily. I reached down, to take the general's hand—he was too weak to climb up to the hatch.

Before he left, he gave what might be his final command, "Follow quickly, all of you." Then he was gone.

Goodmother Quickfronds quickly leapt up and followed him. After a moment of hesitation, Professor Colonel Threeclickson followed. Mr. Eightfold Longtail, however, stayed clinging to his bench. Lieutenant Farfronds went over to him.

"Go, now! You must."

Longtail shuddered in denial.

Farfronds tried to pry his pincers from their grip, but got nowhere.

"Get out of here, Loudpincers," he told me.

Again, I disobeyed orders, dropped from the hatch and tried to help pry Longtail loose. But it was hopeless. I touched Farfronds and drooped my fronds.

He nodded. "Go. I will follow."

This time I did go, leaping for the open hatch and pulling myself out and through almost in one move. The scream of the water passing by it made the falling sphere below me visible, if in a wavy, uncertain way. Below, to my right, I could make out the courtyard of the university—too close, I thought. I spread my arms and legs as Farfronds had told me, and my fall slowed immediately.

I stared at the sphere, receding below. Where was he? There! a dark shadow appeared in the glowing slipstream, and began sliding off to the right.

The sphere suddenly exploded in a million frequencies of sound and went dark. I chirped, and saw the ice below me, coming up too fast. Now my height and fall were very real; every muscle in my body tensed with terror. I struggled for control and stretched myself as much as possible and flailed at the water with my claws, trying to swim back. At the last moment, I put all eight limbs down to break my fall.

The landing was an anticlimax; I didn't hit any harder, I thought, than if I'd landed after jumping as high as I could. Terminal velocity, Farfronds had said. I had learned, I thought, a great lesson of mind over instinct. Feeling myself whole, I chirped in the general direction of where the sphere hit, saw it, and headed that way to see what I might do to help poor Longtail.

On my way, I saw a bright crunch, chirped, and recognized Colonel Professor Threeclickson. Of course, having left the sphere before I did, he would have had longer to fall. I went over to him, and ascertained that he had come through the fall as well as I had.

Then I told him the bad news. "Sir, Longtail wouldn't leave the sphere. I was headed over to see what I could do."

"You should stay back, Loudpincers. You would not want to see what must . . . forgive me. You have already . . . I . . . yes, let us go see what we can do."

Threeclickson had asked me to forgive *him.* I sensed again that whatever happened now, my life had changed greatly.

Goodmother Quickfronds landed just then and scuttled over to us. We told her what had happened. "Threeclickson, tend to the general when he comes down. Rest should be all he needs, and a little cleaning off. Loudpincers, you're young and strong. Come with me."

We were halfway to the wreckage before I'd realized how easily Quickfronds had given orders and how uncomplainingly Threeclickson had obeyed. Five cycles ago, he had been the terror of my life. An act for the benefit of the students, I surmised, by one whose real nature was to defer to others. Yet I almost felt sorry for him.

We reached the crumpled sphere and found our way in through a hole in the wreckage. Lt. Farfronds, of course, had gotten there before us, but there was nothing to be done. A jagged section of the hull had neatly severed Longtail's abdomen from his thorax. He had, uselessly, extricated himself and tried to hold his severed half against the wound, but that, Quickfronds said, only hastened his death, as certain fluids from the nether part should not mix with those in the thorax.

Quickfronds turned to us. "Should you ever find yourself in such a situation, do what you can to stem the bleeding from the thorax. You will still die, but may have as much as a cycle or two to say and do whatever last things you have to say or do."

Threeclickson and General Sharpfronds arrived next. We removed the unfortunate Longtail from the wreckage and all stood vigil for an eighth of a cycle as his body became light and ascended to the land of the dead, to become part of that slime in which I had been briefly immersed. I shivered, thinking about what I had touched. I thought of my conversation with Quickfronds as I watched Longtail ascend. If our universe was an egg with a single shell, what lay outside? What laid it?

We were a sober group back at the University, arms at sides, fronds still. General Sharpfronds, now much recovered, addressed us along with several military commanders and university staff.

"Gentlepeople, we took our best shot at it. We learned much of cosmological and perhaps theological interest, though the eater of souls we encountered seemed a very physical creature. Looking at echoes, I might have worn a rope and been pulled back with much less bother. But such an encumbrance could itself have been risky. Again, we took our best shot.

"Now we are in a very grave situation. Lushole has fallen; nothing remains between Long Valley and the empire. Highfronds has delivered an ultimatum: we should submit peacefully as inferiors to his superior government, or be crushed by his armed forces. We have five cycles to reply." The general snapped a pincer in contempt. "He has that little respect for our ability to improve our defenses significantly in that time. Hubris may be his undoing. Highfronds is a charismatic leader—do not underestimate him. But the juices of his abdomen run his mind, and we shall make that our advantage. We will do the unexpected, the unanticipated. We will fight creatively.

"The good news is that our war floaters are ready. With enough lightstone to float a dozen of them, we should be able to even the odds and make advance against us too expensive for them. If we can float all thirty, we may be able to repel them without significant losses of our own; a result that might guarantee our independence for some time. But that is a still-sealed chrysalis; we need more lightstone, for we can float only one as things stand.

"Lieutenant Lecturer Loudpincers has found a possible source of lightstone deep within the ice."

There were murmurs in reaction to this news, creating far more of a stir when it came from the general's voice holes than it when it had come from mine only a few cycles or so ago. But I barely noticed: Lieutenant Lecturer Loudpincers, he had called me. Graduation eight times eight cycles early and a field commission, too! If only I proved worthy of it.

The general continued. "It will take some time to dig it out, six to seven cycles. We will move civilian population and the war floaters deep within our territory, back in the cracks where they will be hard to find and may easily defend themselves. The University hexagon we shall turn into a citadel, capable of holding out for a hundred cycles against any attack machines we have heard of the Westerians possessing. They may yet come up with some new weapon to save, or revenge, our people—but that is a very faint hope indeed. Our best chance lies with the war floaters.

"General Highthorax and General Stronglegs have prepared maneuvers and delaying actions that might give us three cycles or so beyond the ultimatum date. In that time, which will be purchased with the lives of the brave, we must find Loudpincer's giant lightstone, section it, and launch the war floaters. Unless someone has a better idea."

Dark silence covered the gathering.

"The sacrifice will be great and the timing very, very tight. So we had best start digging."

Later, when I happened to be close to the general, I told him, again, that what I had was a theory, a speculation, at best a good idea. "Now soldiers will lose their lives on the idea that it is true."

"So you tell me now that you think you've oversold your idea," he said this with cold stillness.

I trembled; I had never been so frightened.

But General Sharpfronds rested a pincer on my arm, the reassuring touch of a father on a larva. "I am not so molt-damaged that I did not recognize the risk; nor did you mislead anyone by stating possibilities as certainties. The one certainty, which everyone in this country knows now, is that without some miracle, we are all slaves or dead. Well, miracles occur in combat as well as in craft, but they are done by soldiers who have *hope*. If we had not had your lightstone find to give them hope, we would have had to invent something of less substance.

"But I would prefer not to rely on miracles of any kind, so let us get about the digging. We have some equipment here that will be useful; my people will take care of it. Refresh yourself and be out there in an eighth cycle."

I nodded, then, remembering my new status, clapped my pincers, military style. "Yes, General."

I headed for my student quarters, perhaps for the last time. I tried to contact Softtipspawn, but she had already been evacuated. Whatever happened, nothing would be the same. I gathered a few mementos to fit in a pouch, then lay on my bench and rested.

When I arrived at my dig the next day, General Sharpfronds' people had spread a great panoply of cloth and pipes around my hole. After a moment, I recognized it—a warmdrill. If one seals a certain flatweed against the ice so that water cannot flow through it, in time a heavy compressible fluid will collect at its roots, against the ice. This fluid, if allowed to flow into a container of dead plant material, will displace the water with its very heavy essence. Such heavy fluid makes plant material grow very hot, and water is pumped through that heat. The hot water, forced down by means of bellows, cuts through the ice rapidly. As a mere student, I had never had access to such inner University wonders. As the chief of a potentially nation-saving emergency project, I had as much special equipment as could be conveniently placed in the area.

We drilled cylinders, a body length deep at a time. First we carved a circle in the ice and made it deep, then, with a special sideways-facing nozzle, we cut in horizontally and so detached the cylinder from the ice. Ropes were frozen into each cylinder, and it was hauled up. Then the process was repeated.

In the distance, the glow of the battle of the University had began to light the sky.

Down the shaft went, just spinward of the large mass I so fervently hoped was lightstone.

"Water," someone yelled. "We've struck water."

My first thought was multishell cosmology. My second was about how wrong that first thought had proved far above.

"Melt water, not seawater," the person in the bore shaft yelled, as if he could read my thoughts. "Great central heavens!"

There was silence. "What is it? Can you see it?"

No answer.

I turned to one of our draftees, Premother Longlegs, a first-molt apprenticed to a sweettree farmer, now a refugee. "Longlegs, go tell General Sharpfronds that we've reached the objective, but something strange has happened."

Someone had to go down. There were only four of us above. Who to send?

At that moment, for some reason, I thought of General Sharpfronds and his pronouncement: "My style is to lead from the front." The organizing had been done; what remained to do was below.

"Tell him that I'm going down to investigate. Platoon Sergeant Shinyclaws will be in charge up here until I get back."

Like most officers who rose via the academic route, I'd taken special pains to learn the names and procedures of the pure warriors, but was still uncomfortable. A seasoned troop might be holding his spiracles in amusement at how I did things, but Longlegs was as new to this as I was. She snapped a claw as if she were at drill, turned and was off.

"Sir!" Shinyclaws said. She was a veteran, and there was a sharpness to her voice that made me worry that she resented my rapid rise; she perhaps didn't take in the three moltings of academic training that had preceded my one act of physical courage. I should, I thought, deal with it now.

"Sergeant Shinyclaws? I'm new to this, I know, but we're very pressed for time. If you're unhappy, I'm sorry. I didn't choose the circumstances."

"Oh, sir. Not that at all. Well, not with you at any rate. I'm maybe a little unhappy because I'm not at the front. I'm still of egg-laying age, I'm afraid, and the general professors are looking ahead to replenishing the population. But if we don't, . . . I mean there won't be any point."

I thought about that. Both positions had a logic to them. I thought it through. "Shinyclaws, the work behind the lines still has to be done. By having that done by females of egg-laying age, the generals cover two needs with one action. Personal happiness is secondary in such times. Sorry."

"Yes sir. I understand. But I would rather die fighting them now than be overwhelmed here and forced to bear their eggs later."

I could only nod. I had not realized the full implications of her assignment.

"Anyway, Lieutenant, ah . . ."

"Loudpincers."

"Loudpincers, sir. You'll be wanting to take a runner down with you, sir. Betterthinker would be my choice."

"Right, thank you. Carry on, Sergeant." The optimistically christened Betterthinker was actually one of the slower troops on the uptake, but he was fast and strong. "Betterthinker!" I shouted. "Come on. You're with me."

We'd built a tripod over the hole and a tube of rope netting hung down from its apex, enclosing the hot water tubes. The netting also functioned as a ladder of sorts, and on these we descended.

As we went, I reminded myself of who was below. It was the third shift; Sergeant Raspyclaws, Mr. Icefronds, the water jet technician, and able soldier Larvasaver. None were evident as I reached the level of my suspected giant lightstone. The shaft went further down; the plan had been to approach the lightstone from the bottom.

Only a half body-length or so of ice separated me from it and I could easily see it by holding my fronds and mandibles against the ice and chirping. It certainly looked like a lightstone; its rugged surface was full of shiny pits and sharp edges. But it was huge—several body lengths across, at least.

I felt warm water at my abdomen. My first thought was that it was the cutting water, but that had been turned off some time ago. The warmth was enervating; I wiggled my abdomen to increase water flow, then switched my body around, hanging upside down so my spiracles would be in higher, cooler water.

The warm current was issuing from the horizontal shaft. I moved down further so my fronds could see through it. The warmth made me forgetful and fatigued, and I had to fight to concentrate on moving each limb, but I persisted in descent.

Finally, I was level with the shaft, chirped, and saw the thing hanging below the giant lightstone. It was long, rounded at each end and unnaturally smooth, as if turned from a lathe.

On the ice in the shaft beside it lay the bodies of my crew. If I went to them now, I would probably suffer the same fate. I turned and began to climb up the cutter's suspension ropes, but could only move a little at a time. I had to get to colder water.

"Betterthinker. The ropes. Pull me up."

I was incredibly tired. If I let go right now, I would literally fall asleep. A very pleasant . . .

The ropes jerked upward, again and again. I should let go. No, I should hang on. It was getting cooler. I was thinking again.

I resumed climbing, and spotted my savior amidst a jumble of rope and tubes. "Good, Betterthinker. I'm awake now."

"Handholds, sir. On the wall. I need to let go."

I saw the notches in the ice and grabbed onto them with two claws as I let go of the ropes with the others. As soon as I had detached myself from the ropes, they slid back down. Betterthinker had, I realized, pulled up not just me but the whole cutting apparatus as well, weighted as it was with superheavy fluid tanks. Well, Sergeant Shinyclaws had said he was strong.

I looked at the tubes and ropes, straightened out again. If they were to pipe down cold water instead of warm, I might stay awake long enough to rescue my colleagues. But I would need something to keep the cold water around me. I scrambled back up the shaft as fast as my legs and arms would take me.

Tailoring is a skill the career military know well, I found out. We took one of the woven flatweed covers and made a rough tube of it for my body, cutting slits to allow my limbs to stick out and tying it around my neck and around a heavy fluid tube just beyond my abdomen. We knew how much tubing the cutter had used, and coiled twice as much for me. The tube served two purposes; to give me cold water to keep me awake, and, in an emergency, they would be able to pull me back with it. I also took the end of a coil of rope, in case something or someone else would need to be pulled back.

With Sergeant Shinyclaws and Ordinary Soldier Bristlelegs pumping cool water around me, I headed down again. It seemed to go more quickly this time, despite my encumbrance. Though I could feel the heat on my head, I had not the slightest loss of energy. The cloth tube that surrounded me, however, puffed up and deflated with each push of the bellows above in a way that would have caused amusement had the mission not been so serious.

I traversed the horizontal tube quickly and reached the bodies of my comrades. Asleep or dead, I could not tell, but I dragged each one back to the shaft and harnessed each to the spare line. Then I called for Betterthinker to haul them up.

Then, alone, I encountered the wondrous object that had apparently followed the lightstone up through the ice. It was as wide as the shaft, and its warmth had melted a path all the way up to the lightstone. The thought of the lightstone reminded me of how much we needed it, and how quickly. The entire crew, I realized, would need cold suits like mine. No matter how curious I was, there was no time to investigate. We could work around the thing, whatever it was.

Lightstone! It must be after the lightstone just like my compatriots and I had been after lightstone in our ill-fated expedition less than three cycles ago. Less than three cycles ? It seemed like a greatcycle ago. The thing seemed like more proof of layered cosmology—but, the layers were different. Alien. My mind was dizzy with change and happenings.

No time, no time to investigate. I turned to leave the shaft and get help.

"We've struck water—meltwater, not seawater. Great central heavens!"

I turned back. It was Sergeant Raspyclaws' voice, much more clearly than I had heard it at the top of the shaft, but it came from the object. There must be beings inside the thing, I thought, from the next layer; it seemed obvious; the large object was their version of the sphere I had ridden to the land of the dead. They were trying to talk to me, but all they knew of my language was what Sergeant Raspyclaws had shouted—so they were repeating that. Could they see me, somehow? I saw nothing from them but that burst of language.

Time, I had no time. But maybe they could help. Help us in our war? How? Perhaps they could carve lightstone—they were apparently after it themselves.

Perhaps they wanted it for themselves.

Where did my greatest hope lie? I decided to invest a few moments and pointed to myself. "Loudpincers."

"Loudpincers," it repeated in a golden burst.

I showed them my body parts: pincers, claws, fronds, arms, legs, mandibles. I shouted LOUD and whispered soft. I backed up for go and went forward for come. I showed them ice, water, and lightstone. I tried "cold water," spilling some from my suit, and "warm water" waving my arms around. It repeated everything correctly and I said yes. I wished it would make an error so I could teach no.

I curled up in a chrysalis posture. "Sleep," I said. I unfolded myself. "Awake."

"Hot water sleep," it said.

"Yes." I was getting somewhere.

"Cold water sleep."

"No, no. Hot water makes sleep."

"Cold water makes awake."

"Yes. Cold water makes awake? Question. Yes. Answer." Would it understand inflection? "Cold water makes awake. Statement. Hot water goes down? Question."

"Come Loudpincers up?"

"Yes." It was quick, picking up everything, forgetting nothing.

But I was getting tired and running out of time. How could I ask them to help?

I chipped some ice and showed them "take" and "move." They understood.

"Loudpincers take lightstone up."

"Lightstone go up?"

I moved my arms frantically, upward as fast as I could.

"Yes, up. Loudpincers take lightstone up fast!"

The effort wore me out. I felt warm. Then I noticed that the pulses of cold water in my tube had stopped. That could only mean the empire had arrived. I had only moments of consciousness left, time for one last plea. I took my ice chipper and swung it at my head, stopping just short.

"Kill. Kill above. Cold water stop."

Silence greeted that. What an idiot I was. What could our problems possibly mean to them?

Unable to stand any longer, I collapsed to the floor of the shaft.

"Help," I said. How does a person alone act out help? "Help." I tried to move an arm. . . .

I woke with cold water flowing into my tube again. My first thought was relief—perhaps we had won above. My next thought was that the Westerians had figured out that I was down here and were on their way to enslave me. I found strength enough to chirp. My tube, I saw, was now running into a squarish hole in the alien thing and providing a steady stream of cold water. Hovering around me, swimming, were tiny circular things with little claws. One of them stopped in front of my fronds.

"SEEN-DEE" it said, pointing to itself with one of its tiny claws. "Cyndi help?"

"Yes," I said. "Cyndi help." Then I remembered the situation above. What hope for them there could be now, I had no idea. But I had to ask.

"Cyndi help kill above?

"No, no, Cyndi no kill."

They could not understand, not yet. They could not understand my nation being raped and enslaved, its heroes and my friends rising to the land of the dead. They would understand in time, but too late, too late.

"Cyndi help above sleep?" it said.

"Great center, that would work! Yes. Help above sleep. Stop kill. Stop war."

It was not done simply. The Iceprobe, for that was what they called it, had to back off and come back at an angle to intercept our shaft. There was no room in it for me; I clung to the lightstone while all this happened, and nearly fell asleep again. But before I did, Cyndi brought me a small squarish pack that she fixed onto the back of my tube. It took water in and pumped it out, cold, into the tube feeding my cold suit. For this reason, I was the only one awake to witness much of the defeat of the Westerian army, for Cyndi's artificial warmfall put our soldiers asleep as well.

It was not done instantly. The Iceprobe could swim on jets like a daggershell, but it was alone and the Westerians had overrun almost everything. But they had bypassed the University after Crushpincers stopped their effort to breach its walls, intending to starve it out later. And they had been slowed by the deeply cracked area in the far east where General Sharpfronds had planned Long Valley's last stand. The terrain and our deployment had broken the massed Westerian armies into smaller groups, and Sharpfronds' creative engineering had worsened the obstacles.

There was time to talk; Cyndi learned our language quickly, forgetting nothing and able to understand more and more of my descriptions. I learned that Cyndi was not the tiny machine, nor in it, but existed far from it and talked to us and the machine as Crushpincers had talked on the drum, but without a tight line. She is female—indeed she told me that should she reproduce she would retain the egg in her body and a larva would emerge from her abdomen. Horrifying, but natural to them—and having been in the land of the dead, I am no longer squeamish. She did everything quickly; she came from a place, she said, which had cycles called "DAZE" that were only a fifth of a real cycle.

"How long such wars repeat?" she asked.

I gave her Quickfronds' assessment of great-greatcycles and thickening ice.

She was quiet for some time, then said. "That long be eight to the fourth times our notched history maybe. Stop war cycle now be good. Possibly."

We went to the university first, putting asleep the army that besieged it. Crushpincers had ascended, but the university walls were still held by students and old professors. I was acclaimed a temporary general by the chancellor, and under my command, the university folk made cold suits and sortied out. The line that had tethered the sphere on its journey to the land of the dead was put to another use, shackling a Westerian army. We left eight to guard eight-cubed.

There was no rest. Each Westerian battalion we encountered presented its own problems. We ran out of lines and had to come up with new ways of shackling. Cyndi at first objected to the threat of violent force in restraint. But as she heard the tales of rape and dismemberment and saw the evidence, she exhibited fewer qualms. We soon ran out of Long Valley guards for captured Westerians and had to change our strategy to find more of our own people. In this, my senses proved superior; I spotted and recognized the glow of a battle. We went there and put both armies to sleep.

That was the end of my generalship; the army we found was commanded by Goodmother Quickfronds, whom I was very glad to see. But the fact that she was in charge of an army spoke volumes on how many had floated above while I had been teaching Cyndi our language.

I expressed my sorrow and apologies that I had not succeeded more quickly.

"You have saved us," she told me. "You must not berate yourself for not dying uselessly."

"Colonel Goodmother, I could have argued more strongly to dig for the lightstone first."

"The center seemed like a better idea at the time," she said. "What was done was done."

Cyndi interrupted this. "Colonel Goodmother Quickfronds . . . your title . . . healer? Know bodies?"

Quickfronds turned her attention to the tiny machine. "I did research at the University. In better times, I healed. Now I bring death."

"No longer. Teach me. We end this less time."

After a long talk, Cyndi asked for as much inedible vegetation as could be found or spared. We put it in the hole in the Iceprobe's side. An eighth of a cycle later, a cloud of very tiny machines issued forth. Two cycles later, all the Westerian soldiers that remained marched home in shackles.

Such is my history. Of those of us who ascended to the land of the dead, only Goodmother Quickfronds and I survived the war. General Sharpfronds died at the front even as his contingency plans were being executed, even as I remembered his leadership style. He has the large and deserved memorial outside the university.

But perhaps as great a story was how blustery, inadequate Professor Colonel Threeclickson and a student battalion held off an entire Westerian brigade at the entrance to the northern crack into Long Valley with warmdrills and bombs hastily made from daggershells and tricks of chemistry for half a cycle. Most of our population was able to flee in that time he bought with his life.

What remains is another story. It is the story of contact with the outer shell, where down is up and up is down; of many eggs, some of ice, some of lightstone, some of heavyfluid. It is the story of the beings who exist around other centers at vast distances that circle great hot centers of heavyfluid producing an energy we can only vaguely sense as heat. It is the story of meeting Cyndi in person, standing on the top of a cave of ice, head down and telling me how she thought I was upside down. She is tiny for so powerful a being, only an eighth of a standard body length, even in the lightstone covering she must use in our water. It is the story of her "STAR," "SOL" and her center, "URTH," which she assured me had places here and there where I could exist quite comfortably. It is the story of all that has changed us so much and of which so many have written with much more grace and elaboration than I.

Was my meeting with Cyndi an incredibly lucky coincidence? Certainly it was to me, but it was less so from other views. She was coming anyway. Given our species, she would likely have come during a war; it happened to be the Westerian invasion. She found the thinnest ice to seek inward, I found the thinnest ice to seek outward; the location of our meeting was no coincidence. Yes, the survival of the Long Valley nation was determined by mere fractions of a cycle, but, patriotism aside, that is probably not crucial to the greater story. Cyndi's people are explorers. Contact was going to happen in some random way; it went this way.

Now, nothing can ever be the same. Between war and contact, it will be a long time before our scientists catch up to the standards of Cyndi's people. Our academics are as new larva in learning and our military traditions but an unfortunate history. But this is not without promise.

Allow me but two items of postwar personal interest. The first is that, a greatcycle after I returned to the University, I had a visitor I had never expected to see alive again. A female veteran with a half-regenerate arm appeared in my door with a military click.

"Colonel professor, do you remember me?"

"Shinyclaws?" I was astounded.

"The same. I was captured, but they didn't think a female would sacrifice an arm to escape. I linked up with General Highthorax in defense of the southern cracks. We were winning when your alien girlfriend came along and spoiled the game."

"Oh?" I'd heard the story. "Casualty ratio?"

"Maybe ten of them to every one of us. Defense versus offense, and we had a prepared position and daggershell archers."

"And how many of you were left before sleep came?"

Spiracles flapped in amusement. She knew she'd been caught. "Two eights of us. Against eight to the fourth of them."

"I'm proud to have known you."

She came up to me. "How much do you mean that?"

Suddenly I realized that I was the one who had been caught. "Well, a lot."

"Enough to give me your sperm?"

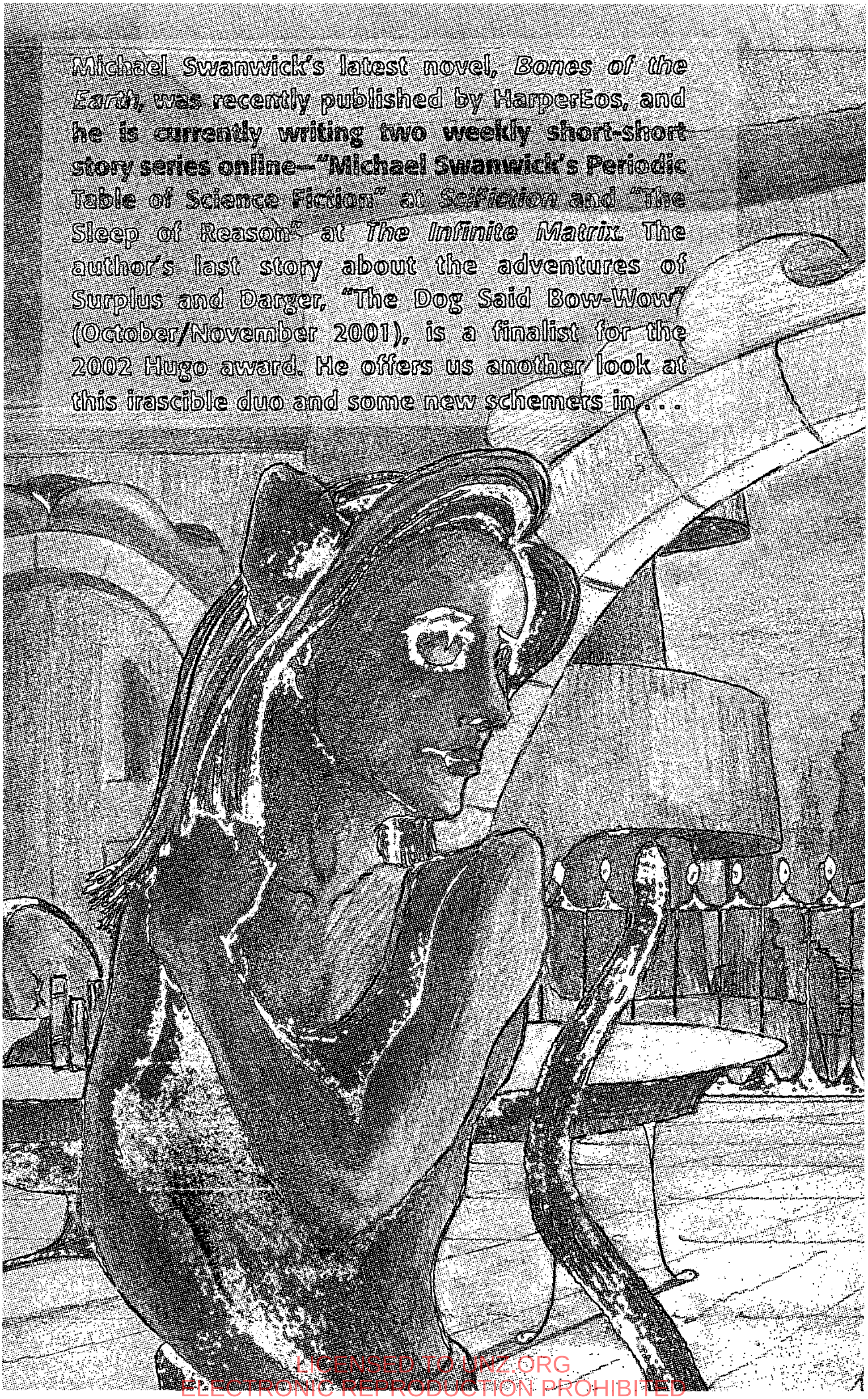
It wasn't, by any means, the first offer I'd had. But it was the first one I accepted.

The second and last thing I have to say was that, before Doctor Cynthia Lord Mallagues left to explain her actions to others of her kind—which I gathered would take some explaining—she made an appearance in the Westerian capital that will not be forgotten for a long time. As a result, the Westerian empire is no more, for they no longer have emperors there.

The Westerians executed Highfronds themselves. They have a unique method in that land; the abdomen and the limbs are severed and the thorax is tied off. What remains is lightened by pressed flatweed and ascends, still conscious, up and into the land of the dead.

I am, perhaps, the only one alive who can truly appreciate what *that* means. ○

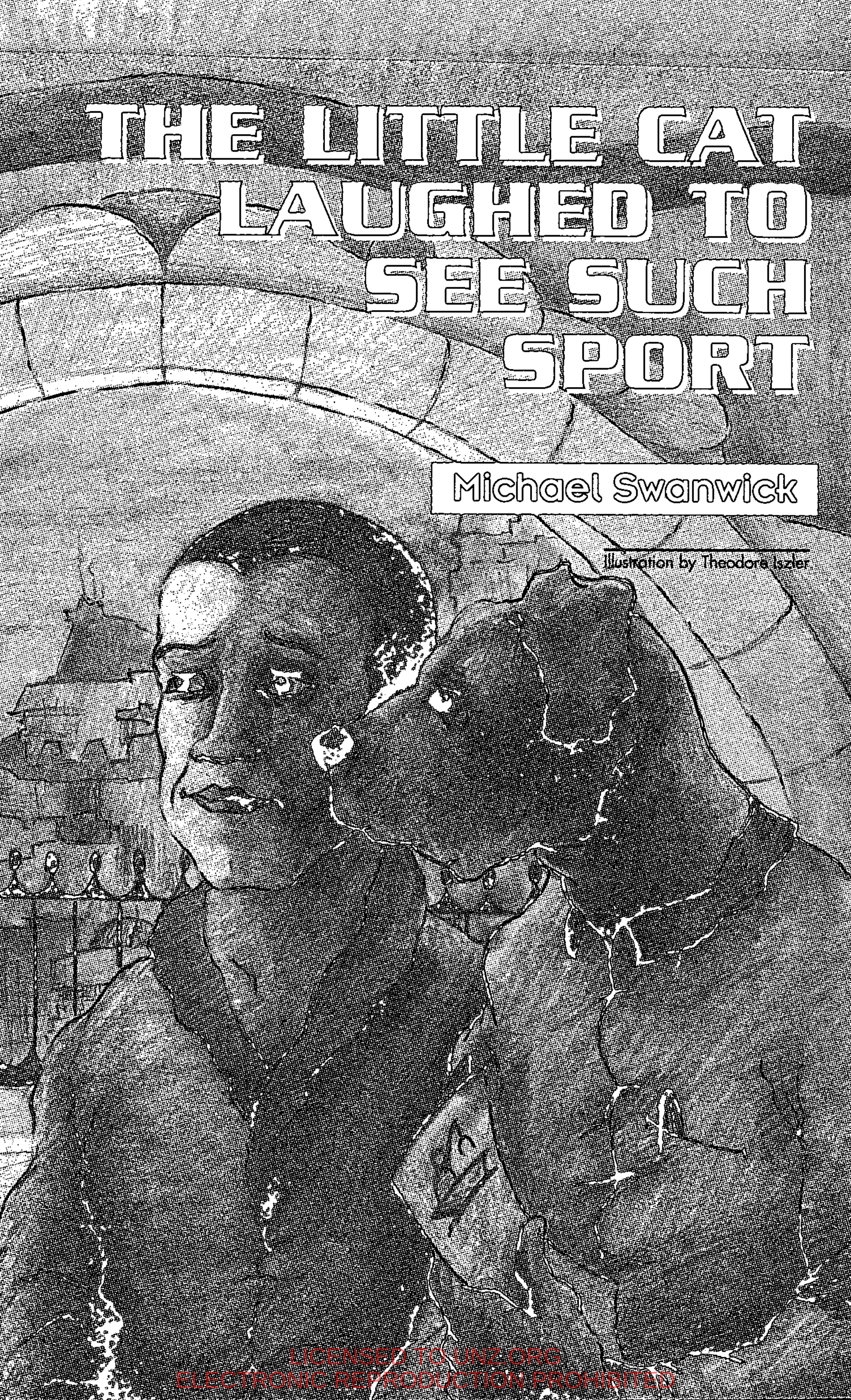
Michael Swanwick's latest novel, *Bones of the Earth,* was recently published by HarperEos, and he is currently writing two weekly short-short story series online—"Michael Swanwick's Periodic Table of Science Fiction" at *SciFiction* and "The Sleep of Reason" at *The Infinite Matrix.* The author's last story about the adventures of Surplus and Darger, "The Dog Said Bow-Wow" (October/November 2001), is a finalist for the 2002 Hugo award. He offers us another look at this irascible duo and some new schemers in . . .



THE LITTLE CAT LAUGHED TO SEE SUCH SPORT

Michael Swanwick

Illustration by Theodore Iszler



There was a season in Paris when Darger and Surplus, those two canny rogues, lived very well indeed. That was the year when the Seine shone a gentle green at night with the pillars of the stone bridges fading up into a pure and ghostly blue, for the city engineers, in obedience to the latest fashions, had made the algae and mosses bioluminescent.

Paris, unlike lesser cities, reveled in her flaws. The molds and funguses that attacked her substance had been redesigned for beauty. The rats had been displaced by a breed of particularly engaging mice. A depleted revenant of the Plague Wars yet lingered in her brothels in the form of a sexual fever that lasted but twenty-four hours before dying away, leaving one with only memories and pleasant regrets. The health service, needless to say, made no serious effort to eradicate it.

Small wonder that Darger and Surplus were as happy as two such men could be.

One such man, actually. Surplus was, genetically, a dog, though he had been remade into anthropomorphic form and intellect. But neither that nor his American origins was held against him, for it was widely believed that he was enormously wealthy.

He was not, of course. Nor was he, as so many had been led to suspect, a Baron of the Demesne of Western Vermont, traveling incognito in his government's service. In actual fact, Surplus and Darger were being kept afloat by an immense sea of credit while their plans matured.

"It seems almost a pity," Surplus remarked conversationally over breakfast one morning, "that our little game must soon come to fruition." He cut a slice of strawberry, laid it down upon his plate, and began fastidiously dabbing it with golden dollops of Irish cream. "I could live like this forever."

"Indeed. But our creditors could not." Darger, who had already breakfasted on toast and black coffee, was slowly unwrapping a package that had been delivered just minutes before by courier. "Nor shall we require them to. It is my proud boast to have never departed a restaurant table without leaving a tip, nor a hotel by any means other than the front door."

"I seem to recall that we left Buckingham by climbing out a window into the back gardens."

"That was the queen's palace, and quite a different matter. Anyway, it was on fire. Common law absolves us of any impoliteness under such circumstances." From a lap brimming with brown paper and excelsior, Darger withdrew a gleaming chrome pistol. "Ah!"

Surplus set down his fork and said, "Aubrey, what are you doing with that grotesque mechanism?"

"Far from being a grotesque mechanism, as you put it, my dear friend, this device is an example of the brilliance of the Utopian artisans. The trigger has a built-in gene reader so that the gun could only be fired by its registered owner. Further, it was programmed so that, while still an implacable foe of robbers and other enemies of its master, it would refuse to shoot his family or friends, were he to accidentally point the gun their way and try to fire."

"These are fine distinctions for a handgun to make."

"Such weapons were artificially intelligent. Some of the best examples had brains almost the equal of yours or mine. Here. Examine it for yourself."

Surplus held it up to his ear. "Is it humming?"

But Darger, who had merely a human sense of hearing, could detect nothing. So Surplus remained unsure. "Where did it come from?" he asked.

"It is a present," Darger said. "From one Madame Mignonette d'Etranger. Doubtless she has read of our discovery in the papers, and wishes to learn more. To which end she has enclosed her card—it is bordered in black, indicating that she is a widow—annotated with the information that she will be at home this afternoon."

"Then we shall have to make the good widow's acquaintance. Courtesy requires nothing less."

Chateau d'Etranger resembled nothing so much as one of Arcimboldo's whimsical portraits of human faces constructed entirely of fruits or vegetables. It was a bioengineered veridian structure—self-cleansing, self-renewing, and even self-supporting, were one willing to accept a limited menu—such as had enjoyed a faddish popularity in the suburban Paris of an earlier decade. The columned façade was formed by a uniform line of oaks with fluted boles above plinthed and dadoed bases. The branches swept back to form a pleached roof of leafy green. Swags of vines decorated windows that were each the translucent petal of a flower delicately hinged with clamshell muscle to air the house in pleasant weather.

"Grotesque," muttered Surplus, "and in the worst of taste."

"Yet expensive," Darger observed cheerily. "And in the final analysis, does not money trump good taste?"

Madame d'Etranger received them in the orangery. All the windows had been opened, so that a fresh breeze washed through the room. The scent of orange blossoms was intoxicating. The widow herself was dressed in black, her face entirely hidden behind a dark and fashionable cloud of hair, hat, and veils. Her clothes, notwithstanding their somber purpose, were of silk, and did little to disguise the loveliness of her slim and perfect form. "Gentlemen," she said. "It is kind of you to meet me on such short notice."

Darger rushed forward to seize her black-gloved hands. "Madame, the pleasure is entirely ours. To meet such an elegant and beautiful woman, even under what appear to be tragic circumstances, is a rare privilege, and one I shall cherish always."

Madame d'Etranger tilted her head in a way that might indicate pleasure.

"Indeed," Surplus said coldly. Darger shot him a quick look.

"Tell me," Madame d'Etranger said. "Have you truly located the Eiffel Tower?"

"Yes, Madame, we have," Darger said.

"After all these years . . ." she marveled. "However did you find it?"

"First, I must touch lightly upon its history. You know, of course, that it was built early in the Utopian era, and dismantled at its very end, when rogue intelligences attempted to reach out from the virtual realm to seize control of the human world, and humanity fought back in every way it could manage. There were many desperate actions fought in those mad years, and none more desperate than here in Paris, where demons seized control of the Tower and used it to broadcast madness throughout the city. Men fought each other in the streets. Armed forces, sent in to restore order, were reprogrammed and turned against their own commanders. Thousands died before the Tower was at last dismantled.

"I remind you of this, so that you may imagine the determination of the survivors to ensure that the Eiffel Tower would never be raised again. Today, we think only of the seven thousand three hundred tons of puddled iron of its superstructure, and of how much it would be worth on the open market. *Then,* it was seen as a monster, to be buried where it could never be found and resurrected."

"As indeed, for all this time, it has not. Yet now, you tell me, you have found it. How?"

"By seeking for it where it would be most difficult to excavate. By asking ourselves where such a salvage operation would be most disruptive to contemporary Paris." He nodded to Surplus, who removed a rolled map from his valise. "Have you a table?"

Madame d'Etranger clapped her hands sharply twice. From the ferny undergrowth to one end of the orangery, an enormous tortoise patiently footed forward. The top of his shell was as high as Darger's waist, and flat.

Wordlessly, Surplus unrolled the map. It showed Paris and environs.

"And the answer?" Darger swept a hand over the meandering blue river bisecting Paris. "It is buried beneath the Seine!"

For a long moment, the lady was still. Then, "My husband will want to speak with you."

With a rustle of silks, she left the room.

As soon as she was gone, Darger turned on his friend and harshly whispered, "Damn you, Surplus, your sullen and uncooperative attitude is queering the pitch! Have you forgotten how to behave in front of a lady?"

"She is no lady," Surplus said stiffly. "She is a genetically modified cat. I can smell it."

"A cat! Surely not."

"Trust me on this one. The ears you cannot see are pointed. The eyes she takes such care to hide are a cat's eyes. Doubtless the fingers within those gloves have retractable claws. She is a *cat,* and thus untrustworthy and treacherous."

Madame d'Etranger returned. She was followed by two apes who carried a thin, ancient man in a chair between them. Their eyes were dull; they were little better than automata. After them came a Dedicated Doctor, eyes bright, who of course watched his charge with obsessive care. The widow gestured toward her husband. "*C'est Monsieur.*"

"Monsieur d'Etrang—" Darger began.

"Monsieur only. It's quicker," the ancient said curtly. "My widow has told me about your proposition."

Darger bowed. "May I ask, sir, how long you have?"

"Twenty-three months, seven days, and an indeterminable number of hours," the Dedicated Doctor said. "Medicine remains, alas, an inexact science."

"Damn your impudence and shut your yap!" Monsieur snarled. "I have no time to waste on you."

"I speak only the truth. I have no choice but to speak the truth. If you wish otherwise, please feel free to deprogram me, and I will quit your presence immediately."

"When I die you can depart, and not a moment before." The slight old man addressed Darger and Surplus: "I have little time, gentlemen, and in that little time I wish to leave my mark upon the world."

"Then—forgive me again, sir, but I must say it—you have surely better things to do than to speak with us, who are in essence but glorified scrap dealers. Our project will bring its patron an enormous increase in wealth. But wealth, as you surely know, does not in and of itself buy fame."

"But that is exactly what I intend to do—buy fame." A glint came into Monsieur's eyes, and one side of his mouth turned up in a mad and mirthless grin. "It is my intent to re-erect the ancient structure as the Tour d'Etranger!"

"The trout has risen to the bait," Darger said with satisfaction. He and Surplus were smoking cigars in their office. The office was the middle room of their suite, and a masterpiece of stage-setting, with desks and tables overflowing with papers, maps, and antiquarian books competing for space with globes, surveying equipment, and a stuffed emu.

"And yet, the hook is not set. He can still swim free," Surplus riposted. "There was much talk of building coffer dams of such and so sizes and redirecting so-many-millions of liters of water. And yet not so much as a penny of earnest money."

"He'll come around. He cannot coffer the Seine segment by segment until he comes across the buried beams of the Tower. For that knowledge, he must come to us."

"And why should he do that, rather than searching it out for himself?"

"Because, dear fellow, it is not to be found there. We lied."

"We have told lies before, and had them turn out to be true."

"That too is covered. Over a century ago, an eccentric Parisian published an account of how he had gone up and down the Seine with a rowboat and a magnet suspended on a long rope from a spring scale, and found nothing larger than the occasional rusted hulk of a Utopian machine. I discovered his leaflet, its pages uncut, in the *Bibliothèque Nationale*."

"And what is to prevent our sponsor from reading that same chapbook?"

"The extreme unlikelihood of such a coincidence, and the fact that I later dropped the only surviving copy in all the city into the Seine."

That same night Darger, who was a light sleeper, was awakened by the sound of voices in the library. Silently, he donned blouse and trousers, and then put his ear to the connecting double doors.

He could hear the cadenced rise and fall of conversation, but could not quite make out the words. More suspiciously, no light showed in the crack under or between the doors. Surplus, he knew, would not have scheduled a business appointment without consulting him. Moreover, though one of the two murmuring voices might conceivably be female, there were neither giggles nor soft, drawn-out sighs but, rather, a brisk and informational tone to their speech. The rhythms were all wrong for it to be one of Surplus's assignations.

Resolutely, Darger flung the doors open.

The only light in the office came from the moon without. It illuminated not two but only one figure—a slender one, clad in skin-tight clothes. She (for by the outline of her shadowy body, Darger judged the intruder to be female) whirled at the sound of the doors slamming. Then, with astonishing grace, she ran out onto the balcony, jumped up on its rail, and leaped into the darkness. Darger heard the woman noisily rattling up the bamboo fire escape.

With a curse, he rushed after her.

By the time Darger had reached the roof, he fully expected his mysterious intruder to be gone. But there she was, to the far end of the hotel, crouched alongside one of the chimney-pots in a wary and watchful attitude. Of her face he could see only two unblinking glints of green fire that were surely her eyes. Silhouetted as she was against a sky filled with rags and snatches of moon-bright cloud, he could make out the outline of one pert and perfect breast, tipped with a nipple the size of a dwarf cherry. He saw how her long tail lashed back and forth behind her.

For an instant, Darger was drawn up by a wholly uncharacteristic feeling of supernatural dread. Was this some imp or fiend from the infernal nether-regions? He drew in his breath.

But then the creature turned and fled. So Darger, reasoning that if *it* feared *him* then he had little to fear from *it,* pursued.

The imp-woman ran to the edge of the hotel and leaped. Only a short alley separated the building from its neighbor. The leap was no more than six feet. Darger followed without difficulty. Up a sloping roof she ran. Over it he pursued her.

Another jump, of another alley.

He was getting closer now. Up a terracotta-tiled rooftop he ran. At the ridge-line, he saw with horror his prey extend herself in a low flying leap across a gap of at least fifteen feet. She hit the far roof with a tuck, rolled, and sprang to her feet.

Darger knew his limitations. He could *not* leap that gap.

In a panic, he tried to stop, tripped, fell, and found himself sliding feet-first on his back down the tiled roof. The edge sped toward him. It was a fall of he-knew-not-how-many floors to the ground. Perhaps six.

Frantically, Darger flung out his arms to either side, grabbing at the tiles, trying to slow his descent by friction. The tiles bumped painfully beneath him as he skidded downward. Then the heels of his bare feet slammed into the gutter at the edge of the eaves. The guttering groaned, lurched outward—and held.

Darger lay motionless, breathing heavily, afraid to move.

He heard a thump, and then the soft sound of feet traversing the rooftop. A woman's head popped into view, upside down in his vision. She smiled.

He knew who she was, then. There were, after all, only so many cat-women in Paris. "M-madame d'Etra—"

"Shhh." She put a finger against his lips. "No names."

Nimbly, she slipped around and crouched over him. He saw now that she was clad only in a pelt of fine black fur. Her nipples were pale and naked. "So afraid!" she marveled. Then, brushing a hand lightly over him. "Yet still aroused."

Darger felt the guttering sway slightly under him and, thinking how easily this woman could send him flying downward, he shivered. It was best he did not offend her. "Can you wonder, Madame? The sight of you. . . ."

"How gallant!" Her fingers deftly unbuttoned his trousers, and undid his belt. "You do know how to pay a lady a compliment."

"What are you doing?" Darger cried in alarm.

She tugged the belt free, tossed it lightly over the side of the building. "Surely your friend has explained to you that cats are amoral?" Then, when Darger nodded, she ran her fingers up under his blouse, claws extended, drawing blood. "So you will understand that I mean nothing personal by this."

Surplus was waiting when Darger climbed back in the window. "Dear

God, look at you," he cried. "Your clothes are dirty and disordered, your hair is in disarray—and what has happened to your belt?"

"Some mudlark of the streets has it, I should imagine." Darger sank down into a chair. "At any rate, there's no point looking for it."

"What in heaven's name has happened to you?"

"I fear I've fallen in love," Darger said sadly, and could be compelled to say no more.

So began an affair that seriously tried the friendship of the two partners in crime. For Madame d'Etranger thenceforth appeared in their rooms, veiled yet unmistakable, every afternoon. Invariably, Darger would plant upon her hand the chastest of kisses, and then discreetly lead her to the secrecy of his bedroom, where their activities could only be guessed at. Invariably, Surplus would scowl, snatch up his walking stick, and retire to the hallway, there to pace back and forth until the lady finally departed. Only rarely did they speak of their discord.

One such discussion was occasioned by Surplus's discovery that Madame d'Etranger had employed the services of several of Paris's finest book scouts.

"For what purpose?" Darger asked negligently. Mignonette had left not half an hour previously, and he was uncharacteristically relaxed.

"That I have not been able to determine. These book scouts are a notoriously close-mouthed lot."

"The acquisition of rare texts is an honorable hobby for many *haut-bourgeois*."

"Then it is one she has acquired on short notice. She was unknown in the Parisian book world a week ago. Today she is one of its best patrons. Think, Darger—think! Abrupt changes of behavior are always dangerous signs. Why will you not take this seriously?"

"Mignonette is, as they say here, *une chatte serieuse,* and I *un homme galant*." Darger shrugged. "It is inevitable that I should be besotted with her. Why cannot you, in your turn, simply accept this fact?"

Surplus chewed on a knuckle of one paw. "Very well—I will tell you what I fear. There is only one work of literature she could possibly be looking for, and that is the chapbook proving that the Eiffel Tower does not lie beneath the Seine."

"But, my dear fellow, how could she possibly know of its existence?"

"That I cannot say."

"Then your fears are groundless." Darger smiled complacently. Then he stroked his chin and frowned. "Nevertheless, I will have a word with her."

The very next day he did so.

The morning had been spent, as usual, in another round of the interminable negotiations with Monsieur's business agents, three men of such negligible personality that Surplus privately referred to them as Ci, Ca, and l'Autre. They were drab and lifeless creatures who existed, it sometimes seemed, purely for the purpose of preventing an agreement of any sort from coming to fruition. "They are waiting to be bribed," Darger explained when Surplus took him aside to complain of their recalcitrance.

"Then they will wait forever. Before we can begin distributing banknotes, we must first receive our earnest money. The pump must be primed. Surely even such dullards as Ci, Ca, and l'Autre can understand that much."

"Greed has rendered them impotent. Just as a heart can be made to beat so fast that it will seize up, so too here. Still, with patience I believe they can be made to see reason."

"Your patience, I suspect, is born of long afternoons and rumpled bed sheets."

Darger merely looked tolerant.

Yet it was not patience that broke the logjam, but its opposite. For that very morning, Monsieur burst into the conference room, carried in a chair by his apes and accompanied by his Dedicated Doctor. "It has been weeks," he said without preamble. "Why are the papers not ready?"

Ci, Ca, and l'Autre threw up their hands in dismay.

"The terms they require are absurd, to say the . . ."

"No sensible businessman would . . ."

"They have yet to provide any solid *proof* of their . . ."

"No, and in their position, neither would I. Popotin—" he addressed one of his apes— "the pouch."

Popotin slipped a leather pouch from his shoulder and clumsily held it open. Monsieur drew out three hand-written sheets of paper and threw them down on the table. "Here are my notes," he said. "Look them over and then draw them up in legal form." The cries of dismay from Ci, Ca, and l'Autre were quelled with one stern glare. "I expect them to be complete within the week."

Surplus, who had quickly scanned the papers, said, "You are most generous, Monsieur. The sum on completion is nothing short of breathtaking." Neither he nor Darger expected to collect that closing sum, of course. But they were careful to draw attention away from the start-up monies (a fraction of the closing sum, though by their standards enormous), that were their true objective.

Monsieur snorted. "What matter? I will be dead by then."

"I see that the Tour d'Etranger is to be given to the City of Paris," Darger said. "That is very generous of you, Monsieur. Many a man in your position would prefer to keep such a valuable property in their family."

"Eh? What family?"

"I speak, sir, of your wife."

"She will be taken care of."

"Sir?" Darger, who was sensitive to verbal nuance, felt a cold tingling at the back of his neck, a premonition of something significant being left unspoken. "What does that mean?"

"It means just what I said." Monsieur snapped his fingers to catch his apes' attention. "Take me away from here."

When Darger got back to his rooms, Mignonette was already waiting there. She lounged naked atop his bed, playing with the chrome revolver she had sent him before ever they had met. First she cuddled it between her breasts. Then she brought it to her mouth, ran her pink tongue up the barrel, and briefly closed her lips about its very tip. He found the sight disturbingly arousing.

"You should be careful," Darger said. "That's a dangerous device."

"Pooh! Monsieur had it programmed to defend me as well as himself." She placed the muzzle against her heart, and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. "See? It will not fire at either of us." She handed it to him. "Try it for yourself."

With a small shudder of distaste, Darger placed the gun on a table at some distance from the bed. "I have a question to ask you," he said.

Mignonette smiled in an amused way. She rolled over on her stomach, and rose up on her knees and elbows. Her long tail moved languidly. Her cat's eyes were green as grass. "Do you want your answer now," she asked, "or later?"

Put that way, the question answered itself.

So filled with passion was Darger that he had no memory of divesting himself of his clothing, or joining Mignonette on the bed. He only knew that he was deep inside her, and that that was where he wanted to be. Her fur was soft and sleek against his skin. It tickled him ever so slightly—just enough to be perverse, but not enough to be undesirable. Fleetingly, he felt like a zoöphile, and then, even more fleetingly, realized that this must be very much like what Surplus's lady-friends experienced. But he abandoned that line of thought quickly.

Like any properly educated man of his era, Darger was capable of achieving orgasm three or four times in succession without awkward periods of detumescence in between. With Mignonette, he could routinely bring that number up to five. Today, for the first time, he reached seven.

"You wanted to ask me a question?" Mignonette said, when they were done. She lay within the crook of his arm, her cold nose snuggled up against his neck. Playfully, she put her two hands, claws sheathed, against his side and kneaded him, as if she were a true, unmodified cat.

"Hmm? Ah! Yes." Darger felt wonderfully, gloriously relaxed. He doubted he would ever move again. It took an effort for him to focus his thoughts. "I was wondering . . . exactly what your husband meant when he said that he would have you 'taken care of,' after his death."

"Oh." She drew away from him, and sat up upon her knees. "That. I thought you were going to ask about the pamphlet."

Again, a terrible sense of danger overcame Darger. He was extremely sensitive to such influences. It was an essential element of his personality. "Pamphlet?" he said lightly.

"Yes, that silly little thing about a man in a rowboat. *Vingt Ans* . . . something like that. I've had my book scouts scouring the stalls and garrets for it since I-forget-when."

"I had no idea you were looking for such a thing."

"Oh, yes," she said. "I was looking for it. And I have found it too."

"You have what?"

The outer doors of their apartments slammed open, and the front room filled with voices. Somebody—it could only be Monsieur—was shouting at the top of his weak voice. Surplus was clearly trying to soothe him. The Dedicated Doctor was there as well, urging his client to calm himself.

Darger leapt from the bed, and hastily threw on his clothes. "Wait here," he told Mignonette. Having some experience in matters of love, he deftly slipped between the doors without opening them wide enough to reveal her presence.

He stepped into absolute chaos.

Monsieur stood in the middle of the room waving a copy of an ancient pamphlet titled *Vingt Ans dans un Bateau à Rames* in the air. On its cover was a crude drawing of a man in a rowboat holding a magnet from a fishing pole. He shook it until it rattled. "Swindlers!" he cried. "Confidence tricksters! Deceivers! Oh, you foul creatures!"

"Please, sir, consider your leucine aminopeptidases," the Dedicated Doctor murmured. He wiped the little man's forehead with a medicated cloth. "You'll put your inverse troponin ratio all out of balance. Please sit down again."

"I am betrayed!"

"Sir, consider your blood pressure."

"The Tour d'Etranger was to be my immortality!" Monsieur howled. "What can such false cozeners as you know of immortality?"

"I am certain there has been a misunderstanding," Surplus said.

"Consider your fluoroimmunohistochemical systems. Consider your mitochondrial refresh rate."

The two apes, released from their chair-carrying chore, were running in panicked circles. One of them brushed against a lamp and sent it crashing to the floor.

It was exactly the sort of situation that Darger was best in. Thinking swiftly, he took two steps into the room and in an authoritative voice cried, "*If you please!*"

Silence. Every eye was upon him.

Smiling sternly, Darger said. "I will not ask for explanations. I think it is obvious to all of us what has happened. How Monsieur has come to misunderstand the import of the chapbook I cannot understand. But if, sir, you will be patient for the briefest moment, all will be made clear to you." He had the man! Monsieur was so perfectly confused (and anxious to be proved wrong, to boot) that he would accept anything Darger told him. Even the Dedicated Doctor was listening. Now he had but to invent some plausible story—for him a trifle—and the operation was on track again. "You see, there is—"

Behind him, the doors opened quietly. He put a hand over his eyes.

Mignonette d'Etranger entered the room, fully dressed, and carrying the chrome revolver. In her black silks, she was every inch the imperious widow. (Paradoxically, the fact that she obviously wore nothing beneath those silks only made her all the more imposing.) But she had thrown her veils back to reveal her face: cold, regal, and scornful.

"*You!*" She advanced wrathfully on her husband. "How dare you object to my taking a lover? How dare you!"

"You . . . you were . . ." The little man looked bewildered by her presence.

"I couldn't get what I need at home. It was only natural that I should look for it elsewhere. So it costs you a day of your life every time we make love! Aren't I worth it? So it costs you three days to tie me up and whip me! So what? Most men would *die* for the privilege."

She pressed the gun into his hands.

"If I mean so little to you," she cried histrionically, "then kill me!" She darted back and struck a melodramatic pose alongside Darger. "I will die beside the man I love!"

"Yes. . . ." Belated comprehension dawned upon Monsieur's face, followed closely by a cruel smile. "The man you love."

He pointed the pistol at Darger and pulled the trigger.

But in that same instant, Mignonette flung herself before her lover, as if to shelter his body with her own. In the confines of so small a room, the gun's report was world-shattering. She spun around, clutched her bosom, and collapsed in the bedroom doorway. Blood seeped onto the carpet from beneath her.

Monsieur held up the gun and stared at it with an expression of total disbelief.

It went off again.

He collapsed dead upon the carpet.

The police naturally suspected the worst. But a dispassionate exposition of events by the Dedicated Doctor, a creature compulsively incapable of lying, and an unobtrusive transfer of banknotes from Surplus allayed all suspicions. Monsieur d'Etranger's death was obviously an *accident d'amour,* and Darger and Surplus but innocent bystanders. With heartfelt expressions of condolence, the officers left.

When the morticians came to take away Monsieur's body, the Dedicated Doctor smiled. "What a horrible little man he was!" he exclaimed. "You cannot imagine what a relief it is to no longer give a damn about his health." He had signed death warrants for both Monsieur and his widow, though his examination of her had been cursory at best. He hadn't even touched the body.

Darger roused himself from his depressed state to ask, "Will you be returning for Madame's body?"

"No," the Dedicated Doctor said. "She is a cat, and therefore the disposition of her corpse is a matter for the department of sanitation."

Darger turned an ashen white. But Surplus deftly stepped beside him and seized the man's wrists in his own powerful paws. "Consider how tenuous our position is here," he murmured. Then the door closed, and they were alone again. "Anyway—what body?"

Darger whirled. Mignonette was gone.

"Between the money I had to slip to *les flics* in order to get them to leave as quickly as they did," Surplus told his morose companion, "and the legitimate claims of our creditors, we are only slightly better-off than we were when we first arrived in Paris."

This news roused Darger from his funk. "You have paid off our creditors? That is extremely good to hear. Wherever did you get that sort of money?"

"Ci, Ca, and l'Autre. They wished to be bribed. So I let them buy shares in the salvage enterprise at a greatly reduced rate. You cannot imagine how grateful they were."

It was evening, and the two associates were taking a last slow stroll along the luminous banks of the Seine. They were scheduled to depart the city within the hour via river-barge, and their emotions were decidedly mixed. No man leaves Paris entirely happily.

They came to a stone bridge, and walked halfway across it. Below, they could see their barge awaiting them. Darger opened his Gladstone and took out the chrome pistol that had been so central in recent events. He placed it on the rail. "Talk," he said.

The gun said nothing.

He nudged it ever so slightly with one finger. "It would take but a flick of the wrist to send you to the bottom of the river. I don't know if you'd rust, but I am certain you cannot swim."

"All right, all right!" the pistol said. "How did you know?"

"Monsieur had possession of an extremely rare chapbook that gave away our scheme. He can only have gotten it from one of Mignonette's book scouts. Yet there was no way she could have known of its importance—unless she had somehow planted a spy in our midst. That first night, when she broke into our rooms, I heard voices. It is obvious now that she was talking with you."

"You are a more intelligent man than you appear."

"I'll take that for a compliment. Now tell me—what was this ridiculous charade all about?"

"How much do you know already?"

"The first bullet you fired lodged in the back wall of the bedroom. It did not come anywhere near Mignonette. The blood that leaked from under her body was bull's blood, released from a small leather bladder she left behind her. After the police departed, she unobtrusively slipped out the bedroom window. Doubtless she is a great distance away by now. I know all that occurred. What I do not understand is *why*."

"Very well. Monsieur was a vile old man. He did not deserve a beautiful creature like Mignonette."

"On this we are as one. Go on."

"But, as he had her made, he owned her. And as she was his property, he was free to do with her as he liked." Then, when Darger's face darkened, "You misapprehend me, sir! I do not speak of sexual or sadomasochistic practices but of chattel slavery. Monsieur was, as I am sure you have noted for yourself, a possessive man. He had left instructions that upon his death, his house was to be set afire, with Mignonette within it."

"Surely, this would not be legal!"

"Read the law," the gun said. "Mignonette determined to find her way free. She won me over to her cause, and together we hatched the plan you have seen played to fruition."

"Tell me one thing, Surplus said curiously. "You were programmed not to shoot your master. How then did you manage. . . ?

"I am many centuries old. Time enough to hack any amount of code."

"Ah," said Surplus, in a voice that indicated he was unwilling to admit unfamiliarity with the gun's terminology.

"But why *me?*" Darger slammed a hand down on the stone rail. "Why did Madame d'Etranger act out her cruel drama with my assistance, rather than . . . than . . . with someone else's?"

"Because she is a cold-hearted bitch. Also, she found you attractive. For a whore such as she, that is justification enough for anything."

Darger flushed with anger. "How dare you speak so of a lady?"

"She abandoned me," the gun said bitterly. "I loved her, and she abandoned me. How else should I speak of her under such circumstances?"

"Under such circumstances, a gentleman would not speak of her at all," Surplus said mildly. "Nevertheless, you have, as required, explained everything. So we shall honor our implicit promise by leaving you here to be found by the next passer-by. A valuable weapon such as yourself will surely find another patron with ease. A good life to you, sir."

"Wait!"

Surplus quirked an eyebrow. "What is it?" Darger asked.

"Take me with you," the gun pleaded. "Do not leave me here to be picked up by some cutpurse or bourgeois lout. I am neither a criminal nor meant for a sedentary life. I am an adventurer, like yourselves! I can be of enormous aid to you, and an invaluable prop for your illicit schemes."

Darger saw how Surplus's ears perked up at this. Quickly, and in his coldest possible manner, he said, "We are not of the same social class, sir."

Taking his friend's arm, he turned away.

Below, at the landing-stage, their barge awaited, hung with loops of fairy-lights. They descended and boarded. The hawsers were cast off, the engine fed an extra handful of sugar to wake it to life, and they motored silently down-river, while behind them the pistol's frantic cries faded slowly in the warm Parisian night. It was not long before the City of Light was a luminous blur on the horizon, like the face of one's beloved seen through tears. ○

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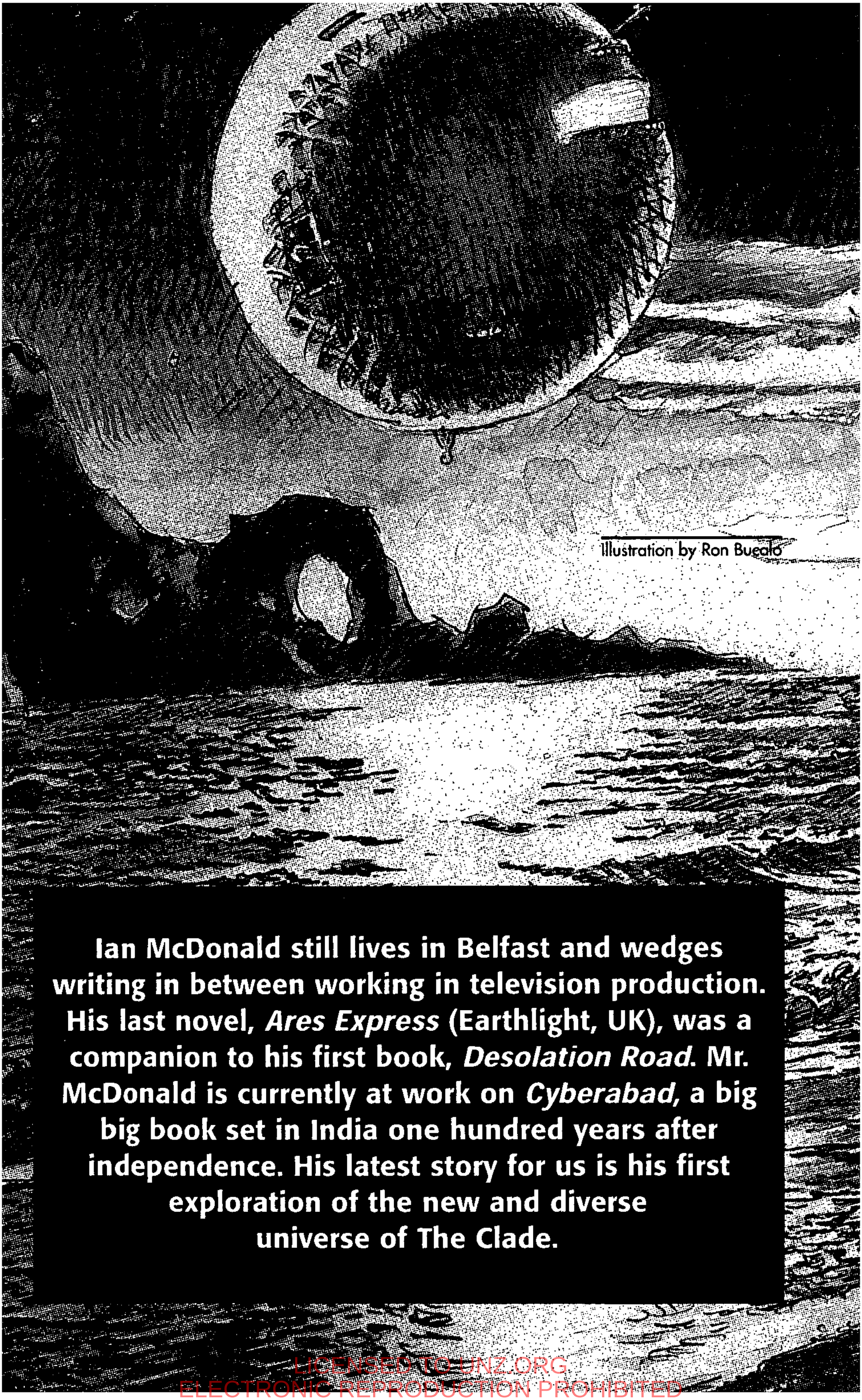
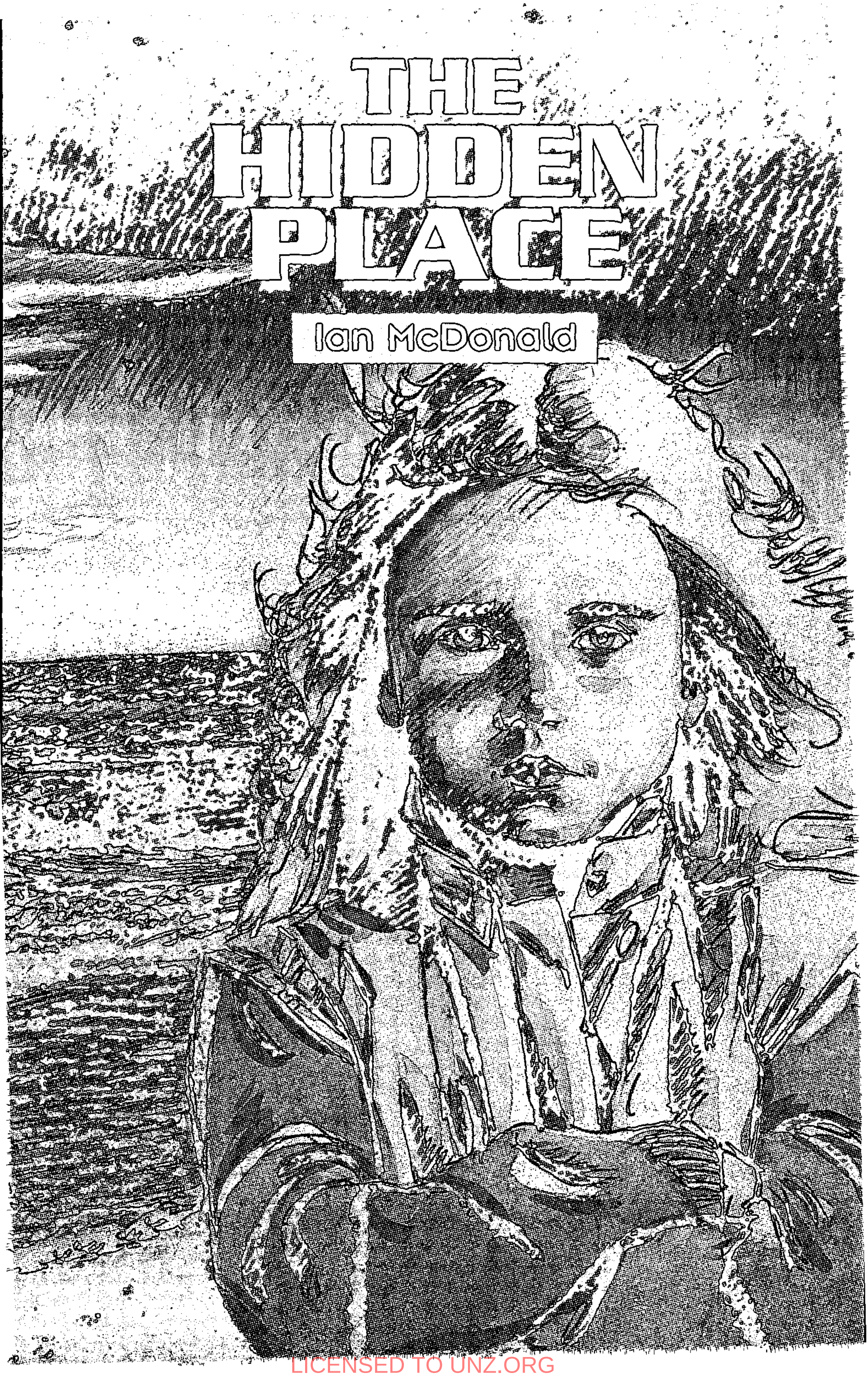


Illustration by Ron Buecalo

Ian McDonald still lives in Belfast and wedges writing in between working in television production. His last novel, *Ares Express* (Earthlight, UK), was a companion to his first book, *Desolation Road*. Mr. McDonald is currently at work on *Cyberabad*, a big big book set in India one hundred years after independence. His latest story for us is his first exploration of the new and diverse universe of The Clade.

THE HIDDEN PLACE

Ian McDonald



The geese have returned to the Hidden Place, and I am glad. Some must have come in the night, for though I am an early riser—the Prebendary is customarily up with the sun—there are already groups and families feeding along the ebb-tide mudflats. Raucous voices over the Wester Greeting cloister make me pause and look up as I hurry to the Crèche. I shade my eyes against the low sun and see a loose V cross the square of sky. It says with certainty that the winter is finally over. I truly thought it would never end. But its last breath is gone. Now comes the short, fierce High South summer. I must make the most of these few weeks of heat and life and growth, before winter closes its hand again. The summer I have never seen; the winter is a dire thing to a woman of kindly Tunshabhel.

"Show me these geese, please," the Prebendary asks as I help her into her clothes. And, as I bring her her favorite *thelbh*, with the ermine at hood and cuffs, she skips back, saying "I won't be needing that, today." The Ambassador of the Clade can wear what she wills, even if she is two weeks off her sixth birthday. I bow, say *as you wish,* and we go back into the sleeping room to look at wild geese. We stand a long time at the big window that alone of all the windows in the Hidden Place looks outward, down the grey sea-lough to Hardhrissag and the great glacier beyond.

Winter is never far. The ever-ice chills me in the pith of my soul. One hundred thousand years deep. I now understand why the windows of this ancient sea-lord holdfast look inward. I think north, to Ahn Shabha, and Tunshabhel in its wine valley, and Fodhla.

Waterwater cool warm over breastbelly turn of head, gasp of breath, sting of eye, pull of muscle, smell coolwater, chlorine gaspaspaspasp then down into the water turning among the legs, the pale legs and the floating lank, swimming, we are swimming, slipped out from work in the midmeal hour as she tells me she does these days: we are swimming, together, and we are standing, together, outlooking from the sole high guardwindow through one pair of eyes.

Thremher.

I feel the Prebendary's small, warm fingers feel for mine. I know she feels me flinch away. I glance at her. She is looking up at me with that unnerving stare of nearly six that looks so so much older. But she is. Lifetimes older. Did you hear that, Prebendary Shodmer? No. She is sibless, solo, alone. *Thremher* is a strange, alien sociological phenomenon to her.

She does chill me, this alien ambassador.

Clarrigh and Clarbha busy themselves to make me my now-traditional morning maté as I call to give them my breakfast report. They are a funny, fussy little pair. No first-thing update on their marriage preparations today. Though I cannot imagine any pair wanting to marry them, I hope nothing has fallen apart at this late stage. I know better than to ask. In my almost-year in the Hidden Place, I have learned something from the diplomats. As usual, the radio is blaring Voice of Ahn Shabha news. Crime scandal vice corruption. Funny how one southern winter can make you nostalgic for all that.

"Geese," says Clarrigh.

"Maybe they don't have them on Naul," I say.

"Doesn't sound like they have much of anything on Naul," Clarbha says.

I sip my scalding, almost tasteless maté through the silver straw while Clarrigh checks the morning schedule. After breakfast and language development lessons, there is an open forum at eighth hour for all the legations.

The Thraini delegation has an hour's private audience at nine, then we break until third. Shodmer may have the mind, memory, and language of a Naulish Prebendary of the Clade, but a six-year-old sibless girl still needs rest and recuperation and running around.

"Here," Clarbha tosses me a plastic cylinder. Inside, a charged hypoderm.

"I keep telling you, it gives me headaches," I say.

"Do you have any Thraini?"

"I could order dinner in Klutaj."

"Use the tap, Fodhaman."

Clarbha has a half smile that melts opposition. He gives me it now and even though I do not exaggerate when I tell him that the language DNA gives me an afternoon of migraine, I take it and it seems all right. Maybe I begin to see a little of what the uThradhan see in the Brothers Gahhadd. So, before I go to the Crèche to bring the Prebendary to be questioned by the world's diplomats and politicians, I slip to the toilet to empty my bladder, for etiquette requires that I remain kneeling throughout, and to bare my thigh and swiftly jab the needle into my flesh. So while I kneel on my cassock, new words dash in vees like migrating geese beneath the sky of my skull, settling on to the flats of my mind in groups and families, grazing, breeding, flocking, flapping their wings so hard I fear the draft of their wings will knock me down.

The chief issue of the Thraini privy session is the adnot, that mysterious Clade artifact orbiting our world. Thrain is a pedantic, reserved nation, given to secrecy and elitism; or so their image is in Ahn Shabha. They envy our success and our open, energetic society. They are our rivals, possibly our enemies, in this affair of the Clade. In reality, I have found Foreign Secretaries Auvaed and Hannaved cultured, witty, down to earth, and their supposed pedantry an admirable determination to penetrate to the heart of any matter. No doubt, they have their own preconceptions of Ahn Shabha.

The session is draining. The questions are finicky and repetitious to me, let alone to a six-year-old girl. After her lunch, I tuck the Prebendary Shodmer into her bed closet for her mid sleep. I set the sound mobile spinning above her: an old old Tunshabhel lullaby that she finds puzzling but attractive. What songs sing the children to sleep on Naul? The shutter is half-closed; early afternoon light through the high window is broken by the fretwork into warm glowing shards that dapple her face. I imagine her skin this color, patterned, marled, alien. Almost, I kiss that face. Almost. For I see her alone in that alcove, lying down the center, the white sheets like a glacier around her. She is too small for it in this one small body. I shiver, shake my head. Some vague premonition; or is it the headache I promised myself, starting? Whichever, I get up and close the shutters, then go and report to my handlers, the TaGahhadd. I have two responsibilities here in this Hidden Place, this ancient sea-hunting retreat. The first is as Guardian to Prebendary Shodmer of the Clade—the second as spy.

"It is not *the* adnot, it is *an* adnot."

"So, not the name of spaceship, but a type of spaceship, a class?"

"No, not a name, not any type of starship or spaceship. It is an adnot."

"An automated device? A robot, a sentient machine?"

"Perhaps. It is a thing itself."

"It cannot be used then to transport passengers between stars, or worlds?"

Some of the strain in the Prebendary's six-year-old voice as it tries to fit round grown-up words and ideas that must be hundreds of thousands of years old creeps into my own voice as I recount the interview. My recall, as ever, is perfect. I suspect that it helped me earn this position down in the cold south, eavesdropping, whispering, recalling.

"How can it? Nothing organic can survive transport at the speeds of the adnot."

"Prebendary, with respect, *you* did."

"My memories did. My personality did. This body, you conceived for me. The Clade is vast. Bigger and older than you can imagine. Perhaps the Type Four civilizations can transport human bodies across space at relativistic speeds—though I cannot imagine why they should wish to—but *we* cannot. We have contacted you through adnot. If it helps, think of this personality Shodmer as an element of the adnot orbiting your world."

Mild consternation. The Thraini Foreign Secretaries begged a moment's excuse and nodded with their advisers and attaches. The Prebendary rocked her torso back and forth on her kneelstool, wanting it all over now, please. I also wanted that, but first I wanted to ask them why they kept asking about this adnot, that might or might not be useful to their national ambitions. Ask about a society so huge that its boundary grows faster than it can be mapped. Ask questions that can dive deep into half a million years of history. Ask like men with stars in their eyes, not politicians begging for votes. I could see beyond the Prebendary's childish restlessness that she also felt this frustration.

"They're getting very hung up on the adnot here," Clarbha comments. He makes a note on his palm companion. "I wonder if they got anything from their satellite data we don't know about?"

A flicker of *thremher* between the sibs, policies agreed, actions decided, in that instant of joint awareness. It reminds me how few my moments of sharing with Fodhla have been. Before the lunch-hour swim, my last contact had been a twilight moment: dance music from the Narravhan New Wine festival, Fodhla with Adhmer and Adhmola driving through the thronged streets, trying to find a parking space. I remember fearing for the masked partygoers: Fodhla always was a terrible driver. I saw the Bhrainth Brothers, the conjoint God of the Vine, rolling drunk in their sedan chairs as the young men raced them around the piazza, I smelled the searing pork fat, the hot oil, the charcoal smoke flavored with sprigs of herbs. I savored the faintly urinous taste of the broached new wine. I saw the fireworks burst over the Vintner's Chantry. Narravhan: the autumn festival. A whole hard season ago. Although *thremher* knows no physical bounds—the Clade, thousands of light years across, may yet test that—the distances of the heart limit it.

"Anything else of any great import?" Clarbha says, palming open a call channel to his own masters in Dahlit Thal.

"The usual cosmic jibber-jabber about joining the family of pan-humanity and all that. Nothing really."

"You really don't like that kid," says Clarrigh.

I shrug. I say: "I don't dislike her; she just makes me uneasy. You're not around her; I am. I know her."

Clarrigh gets up heavily to put the kettle on and make fresh maté. The amount they drink, the inside of their bladders must be like leather.

"I know you, Fodhaman. You just get freaky around solos."

"It's not natural for a child."

"It's not natural for any of you Xenos."

I give the standard psychology answer about creating an environment for the Prebendary as much like her home as we can recreate from the Monologue.

"Her home is *here,* Fodh," Clarrigh says. He offers tea but I have duties I would sooner be about rather than staying with the chubby TaGahhadd and their maté and happy marriage plans. As I climb the great staircase to the Crèche, I chew over an old piece of information in my mind, an early revelation, before the adnot and its Prebendary, when first contact had been made by radio and we received the Monologue across eighty-seven light years from Naul. Everywhere, anywhere, however far you travel across the universe, you will find one sentient species: humans. Thousands of variants but one great family. The Clade. A zoological term, a taxonomic expression. A set of related species within a genus. And, in all that human diversity, *one* world where twin births are the norm.

It is early afternoon, and we are up the glen. It is the Prebendary's favorite walk, a hidden place in the Hidden Place. Shodmer may speak with the words and knowledge of an adult, but she has the delights of a six-year-old. Here by the Shibhna stream are gravel coves and rock pools, rapids and stepping stones, mossy boulders, overhanging trees like hands and faces. Delights aplenty. The first time she saw a dipper plunge dauntlessly into the white water and emerge on a rock at the far side of the stream, she was so dumbfounded I almost called the medics, fearing some mental seizure: too many memories decompressing at once. The sweatlodge, the icehouse, the old hermitage cut into the rock above a deep, dark swirl pool are always fresh with wonder. Every time, she clangs the hermitage iron bell. Today the short chute of water that empties into the hermitage pond is loud, filling the stone bowl with spray, milky with run-off from the ice high up the valley. The chute is clogged with torn-off twigs and branches; we somberly watch a whole sapling turn in the foamy flow, run the channel, and wedge between the boulders in the plunge pool. She wants to move it: if it has not chosen this journey, at least it should be free to complete it.

"That current would sweep you away like *that,*" I say, and see again the tension between the child and the adult sharing this body. We pick our way up to the falls through the wakening wood. The birches are unfolding tiny cones of leaf from their spear-tip buds. The green against the silver is as startling as a masked Nadthanhi dancer's costume. Amazing, I can *smell* the season. The valley sides are mad with birdsong.

"Come on, come on, I want to show you this," Shodmer exclaims, dragging me by the hand up the muddy footpath between the battalions of birch. I slip, muddy my trouser cuffs and the hem of my *thelbh.* Almost, I swear. The fingers tug. "Come *on.*"

We top a low crest and stand on the lip of a hollow where a tree fell winters before and brought others down with it. The trunks have gone to rot, but the tilted root rafts shelter a carpet of more spring flowers than I have ever seen. Yellows, whites, the fragile purple of fritillaries, the blue grape clusters of wild hyacinths. I smell garlic, strong green growing. They nestle beneath the canopies like offerings at shrines. How many times have I walked the path just a few steps from this hidden place, never knowing, suspecting? Shodmer has kept this for me, the newcomer, the stranger here.

"This is lovely," I say, and hear how weak that sounds, so I turn it into a question. "Did Ardrahn bring you here?"

"No," Shodmer says carefully. "I brought her." A pause for me to think about who is the alien here, then Shodmer asks "You don't have any children, do you?"

"No," I say.

"Ardrahn did. She told me all about them, Ahnlil and Ahnthabhan and Traybha and Trayvarra. I should have liked to meet them. I would have liked to bring them here."

We look for a time at the flowers. I am waiting for the next question. I have a fair idea what it will be.

"Why did they take Ardrahn away? You don't have any children, you don't know; why have I got you now and not her?"

There is refuge in my profession and skills. I take it.

"It's the stage you're at. Whole new levels of memories and experiences will come out in the next few months. There're going to be a lot of changes and we thought it best to have a xenopsychologist on hand. It's all part of the developmental plan. I was on the team that drew it up, so I was the ideal one to send. In a sense, I've known you a lot longer than you think. You probably don't realize it, but there were many years of preparation between the adnot's arrival and your being born."

Shodmer looks at me, realizing something for the first time.

"Was I the first?"

Somewhere in the distance is the drone of a tilt-jet on approach. The Venjet delegation. I could end this excursion now, make excuses about muddy clothes and dirty hands and briefings on the visitors. No. She has shown me her secret; I will share one of mine.

"No."

Her fingers loosen their hold on mine.

"How many?"

"You're the second, if you don't count the ones that either didn't take or spontaneously aborted in the first trimester. We were prepared for many more failures; the technology was basically beyond us, techniques we'd been given through the Monologue."

"And the first one?"

"A girl, like you. Identical to you. She was born alive and breathing, but there was no sign of brain activity. The memory nanomeres did not load properly. The autonomic nervous system maintained normal motor control, but there were no higher cognitive functions. She never gained consciousness, she was in what we call a Persistent Vegetative State."

"I understand," Prebendary Shodmer says in a voice so old it startles me. "Did she have a name?"

That tilt-jet is getting closer.

"Shothaman," I say.

The Prebendary considers this. Then she says, "so, I had a sister. And she was identical to me, she was a twin. So I'm like the rest of you then, I'm not an only, what do you call them, a solo?" The aircraft passes to the north of us, close enough to see through the birch branches. Its engines swivel into landing mode, it settles beyond the steep pitched roofs of the Hidden Place onto its pad. Shodmer cocks her head. "That will be the Venjet," she says. "Time for us to go, then."

* * *

Two beginnings. Two stories.

In this first beginning was the sea; Detrimher, the endless world-ocean. It stretched forever in all directions, tossed by many storms, white with waves. The water was clear as glass, not blue as we see it now, for there was no sky, only nothing, and nothing has no color. It was perfectly flat, and pure as distilled water. There was not a taste of salt in it. In Detrimher was no living thing. Likewise, no birds, for there was no sky for them to fly in. On this sea was a boat, Dhan-khu. No one can say how long it had been sailing on Detrimher, but it moved with direction and purpose. Two rows of oars drove it, and a pair of each of the Nations of living things took a pair of oars and drove Dhan-khu across the World Sea. These rowers were the Gods; germ, plant, fish, bird, animal, and man, each as divine as the other, each pair of sibs a God. Now this was a thing about Dhan-khu: it did not know where it was going, for everywhere looked the same, but where it had been, the sea curled up behind it. The water ran down the slope of the world and exposed the bare rock beneath and so the dry land was born. The water ran from the rocks in waves and foam and currents, and though the ship Dhan-khu was huge beyond saying, it was tossed like a toy on the white water, for nothing is huge next to the sea. For a hundred days and nights, the rowers of Dhan-khu strove against the storm water. On the hundred and first day, a wave greater than any other caught the ship and drove it one hundred and one kilometers on to the bare rock, where it broke like an egg, spilling all the life it carried. A council was held there, under the chairmanship of the redwoods, which were wiser than any other living thing. There were still no clouds in the sky, for the general light had not yet gathered up into the ball of the sun. The bare heat killed many living things. Three-quarters of the Fish Nation perished in the naked, universal light. That which survived only did so because of the lakes and puddles left by the tide of Detrimher. Yet they remained, for the Council of Redwoods must hear all things that lived. Eventually it was decided that the living things must scatter all around the round world. The germs rose up and were swept away on the wind to establish their great nation, the Fish Nation swam down the lakes and rivers, but the others were trapped there, even the insects, for they had not yet stolen the secret of flight from the birds. Being so small, they were good thieves and that is why the birds hunt the insects, to take back what was stolen from them. It was birds who came to the rescue. They fashioned perches from the wreckage of Dhan-khu, and slung them between their feet or their beaks. An animal or a plant or an insect sat on the swing and the birds whirled them up into the clear air so high they could see the world as a great blue globe. They transported them far and wide across the world and established them in all parts and places, and so the world is as we see it today, of many Nations. Originally, the Nation of Humans was six sib-pairs, male and female. The oldest woman was the first to give birth, and she bore Cantayuma and Astyaman, the heavenly twins, sibs but boy and girl, unnatural, an abomination. Because they were strange to nature, they repelled each other and one became light and one dark until their mutual opposition forced them off the round world altogether into the sky, where they became sun and moon, he and she respectively. But even still they are sibs, womb mates, and that memory is ever with them, so that even now the moon is at times seen with the sun in the day. But the eclipses of moon over sun and earth over moon are the memories of that old womb-rivalry.

That is one way the world was made. Here is another.

Eleven and a half thousand years ago a device known as an egg-ship arrived in our solar system after an eight-hundred-year journey from Lolel, one hundred and twelve light years away. That world itself had been seeded fifteen thousand years before by ships scattered wide from Drail, one of the eleven colony worlds of the first Seyyamang Expansion. Seyyamang itself had long since made the jump to a Type 2a civilization; its colonies had not received an adnot from it for centuries. Our system had been first surveyed as promising for life by the Ujjire, an ancient and conservative space-going society. Fifteen thousand years Before Present, its fleet of ninety thousand space habitats had maneuvered out of interstellar flight configuration and formed a close shell around our sun. They spent three hundred years in stellar orbit, gorging on solar energy and nanofacturing our asteroid belt to birth fresh worldlets. Then they moved on, ever inward, toward the colossal energies of the galactic core, where, it is rumored, High Type 3 civilizations of biological-electronic intelligences basked in black hole radiation that would have dissolved away simple smart compounds of carbon. The Ujjire greatly desired union with the core races. Our world, our Fanadd, was of no interest to them. They placed no value on pale blue gravity wells. But, at some point, they communicated to one of the gravity-bound cultures they had encountered the existence of a lump of rock they might find interesting.

Our unmanned probes have found evidence of Ujjire engineering activities on some long-orbit comets. Our theories of planetary evolution had always conflicted with our observations of our solar system. Now we knew why. They stripped out our entire asteroid belt.

Eleven and a half thousand years. Eight hundred years. One hundred and fifty centuries. Eighty-eight thousand years since the first light-speed probes left the Seyyamang system. The Ujjire signal to Lolel itself took one hundred and fifty years to arrive. One hundred and fifteen thousand, five hundred years. The recorded history of the Clade stretches over four times behind that.

The egg-ship was an automated world-maker. Nothing living traveled on it, no pioneers, no eager colonists. Its heart was a vast genetic database of all things necessary for a living planet, from soil bacteria to humans. The sequence was primeval; the Naulish rumored that it might have passed down unchanged from the original human hearthworld. The DNA was served by an array of machines. At one end of the scale were microscopic nanomeres that could manipulate strands of the DNA to engineer living things to new environments. At the other were the cloud-sized blimps that cruised the ionosphere, carefully destroying atmospheric ozone with complex chlorofluorocarbons. A few decades of hard ultraviolet would sterilize the native microfauna, then the swollen bellies of the blimps could rupture and let fall a gentle rain of bacteria. Once the concentric shells of machines had sloughed themselves off from the eggship, there was not much more to the thing than a dozen or so yolk sacs clinging to the spine of the anti-matter deceleration drive. To commission an eggship was a huge, magnificent enterprise that required the resources of a whole system, but once the launch lasers switched off and it went into its eight-hundred-year fall between suns, it was utterly alone. It was a bottle cast into the ocean. Lolel never expected to hear from it again. There would be no resupply missions, no surveys or exploratory vehicles. The settlers were absolutely on their own. The first five thousand years of our history belong to the bacteria: the Ujjire caravan had reported thoroughly on Fanadd's suitability, so it was the work of a couple of centuries to strip it down to the bedrock and reseed it. While our ancestors slept, microbiological food cycles were set up in the oceans, the engines of the complex bio-climatological feedback mechanisms that would keep Fanadd forever friendly to our kind of life. For the next twenty centuries, the plants ruled. Forests rose, jungles burgeoned: the conifers and flowerless forms first, then, as insect populations were introduced, the flowering plants and grasses. All in its proper time, in its due season. Thirty thousand settled planets had established best practice. Eight and a half thousand years after the eggship went into orbit around Fanadd and exploded into a million separate components, the first humans emerged from their gestation pods and walked on the pristine world.

It was at the end, the final step, that the nanoscribes made their mistake. A hundred million transcriptions, then one small slip, non-lethal but profound. To raise the population quickly enough to escape death by genetic drift, the settlers had been genetically engineered for twin births. Once the population reached a self-sustaining level, the gene was supposed to switch to double recessive. That gene never switched.

Two beginnings. One told through myth and faith. The other through the decades-long discourse of the Monologue. Believe whichever you will. Both agree that we are a special creation, either divine or technological. The fossil record says only—graphically—that we are strangers to this world. Some of the religious cannot accept that we are the works of humans, not gods, though men who can blast a planet down to the bedrock and resurrect it might as well be gods. There is no archaeological evidence of the settlement, no buried gestation pods or fossilized seeding machines. The dead spine of the eggship burned up in our atmosphere when it ran out of reaction mass. It could have been the Pearly-Semen-String Star by which the Ardvha Dhran astronomers foretold the seven-year drought that destroyed the Cappadhridd Empire. Geophysicists and metallurgists are currently studying a number of small impact craters for metal ions. As yet, no physical evidence. What then of the other story? Deity requires no evidence. Our oral traditions share a number of core images, the world sea, the notion of the reality as a single seminal entitythat divided into complementary and opposed twin emanations. Likewise, our languages seem to share one common root. Studies of our mitochondrial DNA show how closely related even the most hostile of nations are. The settlers were introduced at the technological level of iron tools. They would have had the sophistication for writing, but for those first few generations, the imperative was to survive. They would not have been able to raise their heads to keep records. There were desperately few of them. They were terribly alone.

We still are.

Late afternoon is meetings, an introduction to the new, post-election Khumetran delegation, then the weekly analysis session of the Xenos, as we call ourselves. The xenobiologists, the xenoanthropologists, the xenosociologists, the xenolinguists, the xenopsychologists. *Ists* would be a more honest name. The specialists. The scientists. The spies. No ist in that. No honesty. The hypocrisy amazes me; in a multi-national operation like this, everybody works for someone, but we go on with our reports, our agendas, our petty professional politics, as if somehow by pleading guilty to a lesser charge, our greater crimes will go unnoticed. Deghra Dhunn is his usual terrier self, going back again and again and again to the same trivial points, as if shaking a rat. It is a heavy session, and the truth is that our *ists* and *isms* are vanities; everything we know either came on the hotline via the Monologue, or was set in biochemistry eighty-seven years ago by the Naulish.

It is evening now, and I am walking by the shore. The tide is on the ebb and the geese are following it, pecking over the exposed mud, necks dabbing and stabbing. The sky is barred with yellow and purple streamers of cloud. The air holds an edge of chill; I fold my hands into the fur cuffs of my *thelbh.* I am quite alone.

That thought, that word, strikes a different chill, one that penetrates the thick material of my *thelbh.* To be singular, on a world where all life is lived in the plural. Solitude is a defect of birth, or a kind of dying. *Dhakhti* is now almost unknown in our society, but I remember my gran'amma when she lost gran'tante, and I remember even at that young age thinking, sometimes, it is best to go with the dead. She lasted two months. I am certain that she willed herself out of the living. Half of her was already dead and burned.

Here is a stone pier, yellow with lichen, where the old royal sea-hunters set out on the whale-path. I walk to its end, by the grey stone bollards. Kelp is undulating slowly in the tide run.

A sudden, chill flaw of wind. I shiver. Is that what you fear, Fodhaman Sulbha Bhaskarbhek? Yourself, alone? When I was quite small, I would wake in the night in our cubby in the house at Bhrander. I would listen to Fodhla breathing next to me, feel the warmth of her, sense the movement of her body. I would push the sound and the warmth and the movement away from me until I could not distinguish them from the noise and movement of the late-night traffic. I imagined myself alone. I can still remember that awful, cold panic. Here, brought to the water, it tells me things I have never heard from it before.

The fear, the *alone,* the cold clutch at the heart of me. It is saying, time, time, time. And choices. Fodhla and Fodhaman, those clever clever sisters, their talent laying a path straight ahead of them. Friends branched off into other careers, into marriages, into families, but you, the dogged uBhaskarbhek, stayed true to that path, and it led true, to the Hidden Place and an alien embassy. All that time, you thought you had enough time to also go down those other ways, but you don't. The winter is coming; this one will never end.

I cannot bear to pass out of this world childless. But time, time . . . and choices . . . and the Prebendary, that alien mind incarnated in the body of a six-year-old girl?

"Fodhaman."

The voice is soft, calculated not to surprise, but in my state of mind, it is like a gunshot. I cannot hide my sudden start.

"I'm sorry, Ambassador, I was . . . miles away."

"No, I'm sorry to interrupt," says the conjoint, Hadrha.

"There's something we have to ask you," Haddavher says, and from his tone, I understand that much more is known than needs to be said. I glance around, self-conscious. The Hidden Place has only one outward-looking window, but I feel hideously conspicuous, we three at the end of the pier.

"Ambassador, with respect, there are channels."

"And have Clarrigh and Clarbha fob me off with another packet of the Intelligence Agency's pre-digested baby food? No, I'm afraid I'm here to ask personal questions, and only personal answers will do."

I turn away to look out to sea, hoping that the Ambassadors will not see me stiffen.

"Ask whatever you like, Ambassador."

"The Clade, what do you make of it?"

"The Clade is an interstellar hyperculture of thirty thousand societies and civilizations so diverse that we wouldn't even recognize some of them as human. The Clade is so vast and ancient it does not know all of itself; it grows so fast and vigorously, it never can."

"And Naul, the Prebendary's home world?"

"Naul is not a single world. I believe the word in their *lingua franca* means *system*. As far as I know, Naul consists of naturally habitable planets, terraformed worlds and moons, and extensive colonization of its uninhabitable gas giant satellites, as well as highly developed asteroid and comet communities and a halo of constructed space habitats. System population is close to one trillion sentients. Naul is a Type 2 civilization, a very junior member of the Clade."

I hear Ambassador Hadrha huff air from his cheeks. I have tried to keep my words simple and unexaggerated, but the scale of the Clade intimidates our aspirations. It is a society on the cosmic scale, building for eternity. Haddavher nods. He says, "Fodhaman, tell me, have we anything to fear from the Clade?"

"There aren't any wars between worlds, if that's what you're afraid of. The economics are unfeasible, and anyway, what we hold so preciously here doesn't have much value out there. There isn't a Cladish invasion fleet on the way. But . . ."

"Go on, please."

"The Clade is so big and old that its history consists mostly of rumors."

"What rumors have you heard?"

"You know that no non-human sentience has ever been found. It seems almost certain that our intelligence is unique in the universe. There are only humans . . . but some variants have become . . . alien."

"Well, knowing even what I do about Naul, I can see how our society could be considered . . . exotic."

"The higher-level cultures are trans-biological."

"Machines? Computers?"

"No, much more than that. I can't begin to understand how life there is lived, but at a certain level, biology and technology merge and obey each other's laws. There was a society that did not make that transition. Its elite became machine intelligences and destroyed its birth world in a civil war between the electronic and the biological. The survivors expanded outward through self-replicating machines. In the quest for raw materials, they would devastate entire systems."

"Inhabited systems?"

"And mobile, space-habitat cultures too. They believed that all biological life was a threat. Their technology could annihilate entire worlds. The Clade stopped them."

"How?"

"The rumor is that it used a principle known as Asymmetric Separation."

"What is that?"

"I don't know, but I think it has to do with the structure of time and reality."

Hadrha breathes in, slowly, audibly. I add, "We are a very small world. The margin of the margin."

But I know my words have not given the comfort I intended. No politician likes to be told of his insignificance.

"I see," Haddavher says. "And tell me, and I won't trouble you any more after this: do we have anything to gain from the Clade?"

I sigh, look again at the sea and the great ice beyond.

"Ambassador, I cannot say."

That night, I tried to force *thremher* for the first time since my teens. Now, as then, it felt grubby, selfish, soul-masturbation. I would be deeply embarrassed if anyone were to catch me in the privacy of my own room.

There is rain tonight, cold and hard with a grain of ice still in it. It surges and clatters in the gutters along the cloisters. The Shibhna will be high and wild, threatening the Prebendary's hermitage. I set out the items on my desk. I have printed out the best of the photographs and arranged them against the wall. The jewelry, the rings, the hair clasps and pins, the knickknacks and curios and souvenirs and meaningless things picked up, scavenged or stolen, cover most of the right side. I arrange the music discs on the left, like tiling a mosaic. I uncapped the jars of oils half an hour before, and they are already working on the room's atmosphere.

The rain. I have never known the like of it.

The clothes are laid out on the bed. I hesitate between the formal pants we bought in the South Bank boutique in Methevvher and the cold-weather *thelbh* we got for the winter sports holiday in Ithrhang. The *thelbh*. It's years out of fashion, the fur is coming out of the hood and cuffs, but as I touch it, I see Fodhla holding the tatty old thing as I dither over what to pack for the Hidden Place. "Go on, take it. Look, fashion sense won't kill you, hypothermia can." For a moment, the memory erases the rain, this drafty, lamp-lit room. Is it beginning? I slip on the *thelbh*. It smells of her. Fodhla.

First photograph. The Academic procession. A rare wet day in Vanhal, the long snake of doctoral laureates soaked to the bone as they cross the quadrangle and turn into the Hall of Sciences. The photographer is positioned in the cloister gate: flash, snap, as each pair turns the corner. Fodhla and me, in our hoods and aprons, hair slicked down, evidently miserable and wishing the whole thing was over and we had the scrolls and rings in our hands, but Fodhla with enough presence, despite a terrible hangover, to stick her tongue out at the lens. Me, serious, grumpy, very very wet. As it has always been. One vivacious, one frowning, wondering what she's missing.

I put on the music we were listening to that night at the café. Nuhr Widhrhu's *bithren* stalks chords and harmonies over Clarhabhen's solid *ghadhla* beat. Fond rememberings, the nonsense we talked, the guys we kissed. I lift the scenter of *neadhwood* oil. Smell is the mother of memory.

I imagine I feel something.

Photograph two. Wet again. Two eight-year-olds caught in the waves at Narravher. One leaning toward the lens, mouth opening, shouting something stupid but quick, the other looking somewhere else, sky, clouds, a gull, the universe. They are holding hands. Next track: *Messonghi*, a big hit from that summer. It was never off the radio. Now, it sounds embarrassing, the sort of thing you play for friends very late at parties, desperate to catch an old groove. The smell, *ahrum vettivher*, scent of the pines at Narrevher, salt, iodine, sunburn. I had forgotten those swimsuits with the fish on them. Now I feel again how the straps would rub under your arms when they got wet.

One by one, I go through the images, the sounds, the scents. I open myself to them, I will them to open me. I wait for the characteristic small shiver of pre-*thremher*. I imagine it in many ways, but every time it is a draft under the door, a chord of music, a smell of memory, the cold rattle of the rain on the roof slates.

Last photograph. The others have all been turned face down to the past. All that remains are two silly girls in bed together, some time in their first month away from home, at the big exciting university. I can't even remember what friends caught us; boys or girls. It's early; we've been drinking the night before. Fodhla lunges toward the camera, mouth open, hair all over the place. I, as usual, am the dozy-looking one, frowning out from some unexpected angle of the big white quilt. I lift the porcelain jar of *itrhain*, clean, salty, driftwoody. It smells of the sun of Vanhal, its clean sheets and the sea tang that blew through the lecture hall's huge windows. I slip on the Adduharppha. It's a big, long dance piece, new that night, when we all rushed to load it and get our friends round to listen. I could always dance to that. Even now I can feel it move me. It sounds dated now, the rhythms are obvious, regular, but it was a great time to be alive, to be young, to be on your own in the world. I venture a little step or two across the floor. Be there, I will. Be there. Do you remember? Do you remember? Be there. Be here, now . . .

I can smell it. . . . The room is suddenly so cold, I feel I am falling, falling through the wooden floor, into something, somewhere else. . . . I feel someone turn, as if someone has called her name. Fodhla. . . .

Nothing. Nowhere. I am where I always was. I never left. The rain beats at the roof, the wind tugs the stone tiles. I put the music off—stupid, adolescent stuff. I swiftly gather up the photographs, stuff them into a drawer. Though it is cold in the room—I have never been truly warm in the Hidden Place—I throw off the *thelbh* and stand in my underwear. I feel silly and old and ashamed, as if caught poking at myself in the toilet. I shudder in embarrassment.

Go to bed, Fodhaman. You have things enough for tomorrow.

I am so afraid that I am losing her.

The Prebendary of the Clade is in a quandary.

"The fur or the silk," she says, sitting on the bed between the two laid-out *thelbhs*. "I dunno. Help me, Fodh."

"The silk," I say on no authority whatsoever. "It's a party, you'll be hot down there."

Shodmer pouts, picks up the favorite fur, then agrees and sets it down. We dress her up in the beautiful worked silk dress *thelbh*. Mythological animals dance around her hem and the cuffs of her trousers.

"I think you're right," she says.

"Okay, mirror now," I say and swing her up onto the leather stool in front of the making-up table. Slowly I paint her face. She frowns at the white brow patches, the ochre bars on her lips and chin.

"Six is an important age," I tell her. "It's the age you get a soul and become human. Before that, you're a waiting-to-be-human, a potential."

She grimaces.

"Hold still," I order, thinking it a Naulish adult's reaction to the realities of being a Fanaddhi six-year-old. The frown deepens, becomes physical pain. "Again?"

Shodmer nods.

"It'll pass."

"I'll get painkillers." I am already halfway to the medical kit.

"I keep telling you, they don't work!" the little girl snaps. The migraines started a week ago and have been increasing in frequency and duration. We have discussed little else in our Xeno meetings.

"It's probably a new memory level decompressing," Deghra Dhunn said.

"Or the whole thing unraveling," Marbhandd Tethrevhher warned.

"They know enough about our culture to program it for six years old."

"Ahn Shabha culture, or everyone's?" Bhent Ghaul, a Harppand man.

The truth is that we are all Ists and all we know are Isms, that, and that nothing happens to the Prebendary for no reason. But I find that I cannot bear the thought that I might have to watch the Prebendary—old/young, wise/naïve, innocent and savant—disintegrate. So I hover by the medical pack, though I know its science is not up to this, and I watch the pain peak, then pass, then echo once, twice. Then Shodmer smiles and we are ready again for make-up and party dress.

It's a dreary enough little party. Most of the permanent staff has children, and some of the specialists and junior diplomats. They are done up in their finest and look as if they would be anywhere doing anything rather than lined up under the ivory lanterns of the Summer Hall as the Prebendary marches past them, like a reviewing general. The three factions: domestic, diplomatic, and Prebendary spend the first fifteen minutes spying on each other suspiciously. Ambassadors hover like unmarried uncles and aunts, feeling responsible for fun but unsure how to generate it. A music box plays the hits; they've never sounded so trivial, tinny among the carved beams and high-pitched roof. I wonder if Shodmer is hating it as much as I am. I slip away from the circle of solicitous adults overseeing the strenuous attempts at fun: there are grown-up drinks at the back. The TaGahhadd have already positioned themselves within easy reach.

The akvavit goes down sweetly. So does the second one.

Clarrigh looks at me.

"I thought you were on deck."

I let it pass. In the glow of the first, fierce little liquor going down, I felt, I saw. I was behind the wheel of a car. I smelled spring sunshine on black plastic trim. I felt the seat rearrange itself to my body. I heard the lucky Dhorthi Cross keyfob rattle against the steering column, the engine purr to life. I felt the gears engage and the car bump over the cobbled drive.

The Prebendary is playing Dusty Bluebells. The avuncular diplomats are standing round clapping their hands and cheering her on as she weaves her way in and out and in and out of the circle of linked children's hands. They look embarrassed. Shodmer looks radiant. Alien.

Tappy tappy tappy, on your shoulder. . . .

She is a head and then some shorter than the Buddhaint boy, but he bows out of the ring and hooks on behind. In and out go, dusty bluebells. . . .

Fast road now, evening light slanting into my eyes. The screen part-polarizes, heavy traffic heading home. Drive time. Driving fast: she always drives fast, too fast, too fast for me. One hand fiddling with the radio. Never enough attention, either. She scares me. News. She is a news addict. But where is she driving so fast against the flow? Questions clog in my throat. But *thremher* is not telepathy. There are no words, only sharing. I reach for the third. A hand stops mine.

"Hey, Fodh, don't you think. . . ?"

Tappy tappy tappy on your shoulder. . . .

I give Clarbha a look that invites him to cut his hand off before he ever thinks of laying it on me again.

Shodmer is smiling at me, beckoning me to join the game. I shake my head. If I move from this spot, this focus, I will lose Fodhla. The chain of people moves on, the Ath Shae Ambassador gamely taking up the caboose.

She is reaching for the tuner again, she cannot get the news she wants, which is news about the Prebendary, news about me. Celebrity gossip. Sport. Crime. Nothing about the international negotiations with the Clade. It is old news. Fanadd can join this supersociety of thirty thousand cultures but we will still want to read the same headlines. She is twiddling, the sun is low, in her eyes.

I feel it before she sees it.

Fodhla feels me. She looks up. The truck train appears out of the sun dazzle, head-on. There is nothing she can do, she is too close, going too fast, and she can't see it. What she sees is a ring of clapping people under smoky ivory lamps and a little girl threading herself in and out and in and out again. Instinct throws the wheel. The little car clips the hauler's offside wing, flips over, rolls across two lanes. And I see it all. I hear it all, I feel it all. In person.

A cry. The Prebendary clutches fists to her temples. She is on her knees. The snake of people behind her stands dumbfounded, holding on to each other's waists. Then the ring of people rushes in on her.

The car comes down and I go black. I see nothing, but I feel it. I feel myself slammed into annihilation. I feel Fodhla die inside me.

I cry out but no one hears it over the wailing of the Prebendary. The akvavit glass falls from my fingers. The thick glass bounces, rolls. Clarrigh and Clarbha catch me but all eyes are on Shodmer. She is curled on her side, wailing, kicking herself round and round on the polished wooden floor with her feet.

"Fodhaman," Clarbha whispers fiercely, "what the hell's wrong with you?" He is thinking, a collapsed Prebendary, a drunken Xenopsychologist, and the emissaries of the world's great nations playing Dusty Bluebells.

"Nothing nothing," I say, truly. Half of me has died. I have to go. I have to get out of here. "Leave me alone, let me go, please. . . ."

Shodmer is crying out something, semi-coherent words. In a moment, they will look for me for interpretation. But I am not here. I am dead on the side of the Tunshabhel Highway. I slide through the shadows that cling to the walls toward the door. No one must see me.

"The adnot!" Shodmer cries. "Is! The! Collected! Collected Knowledge! Of the Thirty! Thirty Thousand! Member Societies! Of! The Clade!"

I make it through the door. The cloister is as long and straight and terrifying as a four-lane highway. I veer from pillar to pillar, half a woman.

People, somewhere, keep asking me how I feel. I answer, feel? What do you mean, feel? How can you expect me to feel, when I am dead? There is a woman. She gets up in the morning and washes and dresses. She eats a meal, she drinks maté, she talks to some people in the far north on the phone. They say soft, considered things to her. She can hear the discomfort in their voices but she cannot feel it. She returns soft, considered things over the airwaves. The day passes and she sleeps. I watch her from a distance, I see every detail of her life, but there is no connection between me and her. This is how I know I am dead, I am a ghost, apart, watching, untouching, unfeeling. This ghost understands that there are great events happening in the world of the living. Great revelations have unfolded from the Prebendary's memory about the nature and purpose of the adnot. Xenos and diplomats alike are running from room to room, meeting to meeting, conference call to conference call. The halls and cloisters of the Hidden Place chime with palm companion call tones. I know I should care about this, that its importance should push me back into the world of voices and actions, like hammering out a dent in a pot, but I do not want it to. Half of me is dead. The better, livelier, lovelier half.

One day there is a light knock on the door of my garret room and I know that the thing I have feared has arrived. The Prebendary asks if she can come in. She delivers uncomfortable words of sympathy. Most strange, a tiny child offering such soft, considered words. The ghost watches and thinks, what do *you* understand, six years old, newly souled? The woman Fodhaman thinks, I know you now, alien child. We are half a human each, now.

The Prebendary does not stay long. I am thankful. At the door she turns, a parting word.

"Oh. Yes. I almost forgot. I will be going soon. In the next couple of days, I think. I am going to Dahlit Thal to address the Union of Nations about the adnot. Fodhaman." I hear a need for response, for warmth, in her voice. I cannot look at her, wise child. She says, hurt, cool, "Well, then, in case we do not meet again, I would like to thank you for your kindness and understanding. It has been a good time, here with you. I will miss you."

She knows better than to offer a hand, and I can only look at the place where she has been when I hear the heavy click of the door.

With any death there are necessaries. The calls, the organizing, the rites and the relatives. Little has been left to me, far away on internationally significant business in the High South. I would have welcomed things to do, calls to make, condolences to receive, affairs to straighten. The necessaries get you through. Now, with the Prebendary packing up her small court to transport it to Dahlit Thal, I have not even the business of work. My fellow Xenos are good, but they know that nothing they can do will be right. I have been left long days comparing the color of my thoughts with the color of the sky. And the heart-stopping, hammering *thremher* flashbacks. . . . My mothers and fathers make daily reports on the progress of my affairs, much as I reported to my political handlers. The cremation has been set, the burning tower booked. No avoiding it then. I go to Clarrigh and Clarbha with my request.

"I haven't much luggage, I'd leave most of my stuff here, come back down for it afterward."

Clarbha winces as if a tooth is troubling him.

"If I don't go on that tilt-jet, I won't get to the cremation."

Strange, how easy the word is to say.

Clarrigh puffs his cheeks out and sighs weightily. He flashes his eyebrows at his sib. I sense a moment of *thremher*. I observe, somewhere, that my inner sky must be lightening if I notice that.

"What's going on here?" I ask. "What's the problem?"

Clarbha shakes his head. A man in torment. Then he tells me exactly why I must not go on that tilt-jet. I listen to his telling me incredible things and I realize that, like the ice above the valley of the Hidden Place, there is a cold beyond cold. There is a place where earth and sky and water are all the same color and some people live all their lives there. I thank the TaGahhadd brothers, then go along the cloisters and up the winding wooden staircase and along the painted galleries to my room. I sit in a chair by the window and the world goes dark around me. What I feel now is as shocking, as paralyzing, as when Fodhla died, but it is different. Then, I felt I had died too. This time, I feel I have been killed. I sit, my head reeling, unaware of time or darkness or anything until I hear the gongs of Clock Court strike midnight. I have calls to make, treacheries to perform. I get up from my chair and go through the dark, wind-loud halls to the Prebendary's crèche.

For a moment, I feared that my codes had been rescinded. No. Clarrigh and Clarbha want this. I have always been their agent, even for their cowardice. The LED blinks. The doors unlock.

I watch Shodmer for a moment as she sleeps. As ever, she lies down the middle of the bed. Complex thoughts catch in my throat; time is pressing. The days advance with breakneck speed this far south, from endless night to midnight sun in a few weeks. Instead of calling her name, I start the little lullaby mobile. A gentle wakening. The old Tunshabhel tune seems to fill the night. Surely everyone must hear it. Eyes glitter in the dark. She is awake.

"Who are you? Fodhaman? What's going on?"

I have her bag in my hand, I lift it for her to see.

"Shodmer, get up. We must go. Now."

She props herself up, frowning, preparing questions. We do not have time for questions.

"Shodmer, please, trust me, you have to get dressed. We must leave the Hidden Place right now."

Shodmer sits up in the middle of the big bed and asks a very old question.

"Is there danger?"

"Yes," I say. "There is very serious danger."

I see Shodmer look at the red alarm button on the wood paneling beside her pillow. The Tunshabhel lullaby plays on, maddening now. I want to pull the string to shut the stupid plastic thing off. I reach for the toggle. Shodmer's hand beats mine.

"We mustn't waste time then," she says.

In two minutes, she is dressed and ready; the thick winter *thelbh*, and boots. It is cold where we are going. Already the night is turning grey beyond the window shutters. Convoluted sea dragons and krakens are silhouetted against the dawning day. By the time we reach the car pound, it is light enough to drive. The geese are noisy down on the flats, feeding, breeding. Much to do in a short time. I throw Shodmer up into the big six-wheel ATV. As I slip behind the wheel and press my thumb to the starter chip, I find myself in another car, afternoon sunlight streaming in, the wheel hot under my hand, the sun-heated air stifling in the confined space. I squeeze my eyes shut, force the memory away. My own breath hangs in clouds as the engine turns over once, twice, then takes.

"Are you right?" I ask.

Shodmer nods.

"One thing." She scrabbles in her bag down in the foot well, hauls out the music mobile, and hangs it from a handhold.

We are tracking up to the glacier foot on the old high road to the west. The head of the valley is a white glare in the early sun; up here the ground is stripped of vegetation, strewn with water-torn rocks. The milky, melt-swollen river storms alarmingly close to the road. Our way will take us up to the edge of the ice plateau, west to the pass and down into the valley of the Garvadd, and Thrain. The driving is good, the road is old and holed, every melt season gnaws a few centimeters off its margins and eats a few more potholes, but at least it is free from snow. The wind up here blows constantly down from the high icefields of the Hundhra. It sweeps the road clear, dries off any runwater or slush. That is good. I want to make time. Soon they will notice that the Prebendary is gone, and I want to be within an easy run of Thrain by then. The tilt-jet could find me and stop me anywhere on the pass; they could even call in aircraft from the base at Navvhanddher. It would take some explaining, but they already have their cover story and there are few eyes this far south. That is why they call it the Hidden Place.

Shodmer has been drifting between waking and dozing. I have the heating up full, necessary, drowsy heat. I provoke conversation, more for my wakefulness than hers. That torrent down there would turn us over and sweep us away in an instant. I ask her about her memories of Naul.

"You understand that they are just that, memories," she says. "They're necessary for me so I have a genuine impression, but I never lived there."

Necessary. That malignant word.

"What do you remember?" I ask.

"I remember a life on a world called Emvraer. It's the fourth world from the sun, it's been settled a long long time, a couple of thousand years, but it's a poor place, cold, far from the sun, like here. It's the first world my people reached. It's a beautiful, unforgiving world. Its people are very serious and grave and gentle. They aren't dark, like the people here on Fanadd; they're pale—at least on Emvraer. And of course, everyone is a solo. The winters are terrible, like here. The cities are built to hide from the weather, they all look in, like the Hidden Place. I can remember being in a house somewhere up in the high lands, where it gets so cold that carbon dioxide freezes out, and opening the door and there was ice frozen right over it, like a pane of glass. And I remember powerskiing through the forest and the night coming and having to get back before it got dark because you could freeze right through out there when the sun went down."

"Whose memories do you think those are?" I ask carefully.

"A man's," Shodmer says. "I remember being a man, for a time. He was one of the genetic designers for the Fanadd contact project. I suppose it's only right that he should have supplied some of my memory nanomeres."

The road has become a snake of loops across the valley side. We cross an old concrete bridge that barely contains the foaming, chocolatey water that minutes ago was glacier ice. The water is rising visibly. Good. It will make ground pursuit more difficult, and I am in the best vehicle. I shift the ATV into all-wheel drive. A check of the fuel gauge. Enough to get us over the pass to Garvadd village and a Thraini police station.

"But that wasn't me," the Prebendary says. "That's just a memory. There *was* no me until I was born. Everything I remember, is here. I belong completely to this world."

We reach the start of the pass, under the breath of the Hundhra ice. It is breathtaking country, fresh-minted, the only human scar the concrete strip of the road. Why is it that those landscapes most developed by humans seem oldest and most tired? Shodmer asks if we can stop.

"We should keep moving, we're sitting ducks here," I say, but we get out of the car and walk to a small rocky hummock close by the road. The Shibhna valley is spread before us, all the way down to the sea, and the Hardhrissag ice beyond. Shodmer's lenses polarize against the ice glare; black, intelligent, animal eyes, framed by the fur trim of her *thelbh* hood. It is savagely cold.

"Where?" she asks and I point out the vivid green woodland down by the water, and the spires and decorated gables of the Hidden Place, just visible over the treetops.

"What do you think will happen?" Shodmer says.

"The Thraini will give us asylum. Ahn Shabha will demand us back. Thrain will refuse. They'll accept the Clade's offer, the rest of the Union of Nations will fall over themselves to follow suit and Ahn Shabha will go along in the end. I certainly can't go back again."

"I cannot believe that they would have . . ."

"They would have made it look like a crash. There would have been an investigation, they would have blamed the Thraini or the Venjet or whoever they've decided have to be their enemies this month. While all this was going on, they'd send a fleet of shuttles up to 'protect' the adnot. The others would protest but no one else has anything like Ahn Shabha's sophistication in space travel."

"It would have done them no good."

"Why?"

"Do you remember me once saying that I was an extension of the adnot? In the same way, the adnot is an extension of me. If I die, it dies too. It would destroy itself and the Naulish would think again about contacting Fanadd. Maybe they would decide they had made enough of an investment in this marginal world, even with its unique sociology."

"I would not like that," I say, after a time squinting into the ice dazzle.

"I think it's a investment worth making," Shodmer says. "Should we go now?"

"We should," I say. We walk back to the car but I hold back from opening the car door. "Shodmer, tell me, why now? What did you tell them that made them decide to kill you before you could get to the Union of Nations?"

"I told them exactly what the adnot was."

"Ah," I say. Memories of a voice crying out from a ring of concerned faces. Collected knowledge.

"It's what I had been trying to say all along, but the memory had not come out. The adnot is not a space ship. It's not a communication device with the Clade either. What it is, *is* the Clade, complete, as entire as Naul knows it. The adnot is a repository for the entire quarter-million-year history of the Clade's thirty thousand societies. But it's more than just a library, it's a way of visiting other worlds. Any part of it may be run as a virtual simulation. Clade information technology is advanced enough so that you would not be able to tell it from reality. You may never travel between the worlds, but the worlds can come to *you*."

"And a quarter of a million years of scientific and technical knowledge," I say. "Ahn Shabha would commit almost any crime for that advantage."

I take one last look at the ice, just a few tens of meters away from me. I am glad to be putting this south country behind me. Thrain is a cooler, wetter, more westerly climate than big Ahn Shabha, but we will acclimatize. But the ice says, I am always here. Down at the bottom of the world, I will always be here.

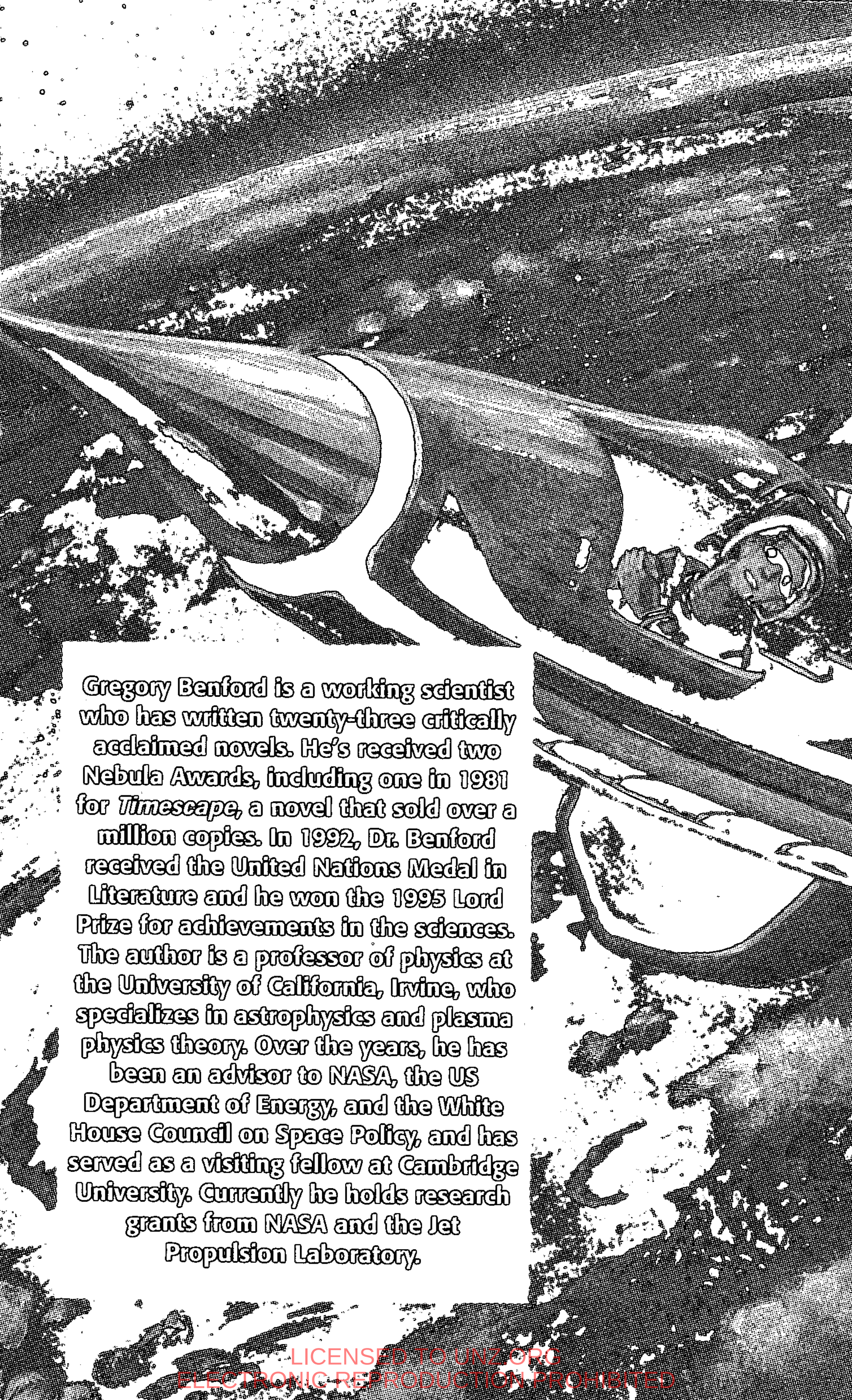
I know.

Then I pick Shodmer up, surprising her into a little squeal of delight, plonk her down in her seat and scramble in beside her. I thumb the starter chip, the big all-wheeler engine roars, and we drive off, up the pass to another country, where there are people who will welcome us. ○

THE CLEAR BLUE SEAS OF LUNA

Gregory Benford

Illustration by Michael Carroll



Gregory Benford is a working scientist who has written twenty-three critically acclaimed novels. He's received two Nebula Awards, including one in 1981 for *Timescape*, a novel that sold over a million copies. In 1992, Dr. Benford received the United Nations Medal in Literature and he won the 1995 Lord Prize for achievements in the sciences. The author is a professor of physics at the University of California, Irvine, who specializes in astrophysics and plasma physics theory. Over the years, he has been an advisor to NASA, the US Department of Energy, and the White House Council on Space Policy, and has served as a visiting fellow at Cambridge University. Currently he holds research grants from NASA and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory.

You know many things, but what he knows is both less and more than what I tell to us.

Or especially, what we all tell to all those others—those simple humans, who are like him in their limits.

I cannot be what you are, you the larger.

Not that we are not somehow also the same, wedded to our memories of the centuries we have been wedded and grown together.

For we are like you and him and I, a life form that evolution could not produce on the rich loam of Earth. To birth forth and then burst forth a thing—a great, sprawling metallo-bio-cyber-thing such as we and you—takes grander musics, such as I know.

Only by shrinking down to the narrow chasms of the single view can you know the intricate slick fineness, the reek and tingle and chime of this silky symphony of self.

But bigness blunders, thumb-fingered.

Smallness can enchant. So let us to go an oddment of him, and me, and you:

He saw:

A long thin hard room, fluorescent white, without shadows.

Metal on ceramo-glass on fake wood on woven nylon rug.

A granite desk. A man whose name he could not recall.

A neat uniform, so familiar he looked beyond it by reflex.

He felt: light gravity (Mars? the moon?); rough cloth at a cuff of his work shirt; a chill dry air-conditioned breeze along his neck. A red flash of anger.

Benjan smiled slightly. He had just seen what he must do.

"Gray was free when we began work, centuries ago," Benjan said, his black eyes fixed steadily on the man across the desk. Katonji, that was the man's name. His commander, once, a very long time ago.

"It had been planned that way, yes," his superior said haltingly, begrudging the words.

"That was the only reason I took the assignment," Benjan said.

"I know. Unfortunately—"

"I have spent many decades on it."

"Fleet Control certainly appreciates—"

"World-scaping isn't just a job, damn it! It's an art, a discipline, a craft that saps a man's energies."

"And you have done quite well. Personally, I—"

"When you asked me to do this I wanted to know what Fleet Control planned for Gray."

"You can recall an ancient conversation?"

A verbal maneuver, no more. Katonji was an amplified human and already well over two centuries old, but the Earthside social convention was to pretend that the past faded away, leaving a young psyche. "A 'grand experiment in human society,' I remember your words."

"True, that was the original plan—"

"But now you tell me a single faction needs it? The whole moon?"

"The council has reconsidered."

"Reconsidered, hell." Benjan's bronze face crinkled with disdain. "Somebody pressured them and they gave in. Who was it?"

"I would not put it that way," Katonji said coldly.

"I know you wouldn't. Far easier to hide behind words." He smiled wryly and compressed his thin lips. The view-screen near him looked out on a cold silver landscape and he studied it, smoldering inside. An artificial viewsscape from Gray itself. Earth, a crescent concerto in blue and white, hung in a creamy sky over the insect working of robotractors and men. Gray's air was unusually clear today, the normal haze swept away by a front blowing in from the equator near Mare Chrisum.

The milling minions were hollowing out another cavern for Fleet Control to fill with cubicles and screens and memos. Great Gray above, mere gray below. Earth swam above high fleecy cirrus and for a moment Benjan dreamed of the day when birds, easily adapted to the light gravity and high atmospheric density, would flap lazily across such views.

"Officer Tozenji—"

"I am no longer an officer. I resigned before you were born."

"By your leave, I meant it solely as an honorific. Surely you still have some loyalty to the fleet."

Benjan laughed. The deep bass notes echoed from the office walls with a curious emptiness. "So it's an appeal to the honor of the crest, is it? I see I spent too long on Gray. Back here you have forgotten what I am like," Benjan said. *But where is "here"? I could not take Earth full gravity any more, so this must be an orbiting Fleet cylinder, spinning gravity.*

A frown. "I had hoped that working once more with Fleet officers would change you, even though you remained a civilian on Gray. A man isn't—"

"A man is what he is," Benjan said.

Katonji leaned back in his shiftchair and made a tent of his fingers. "You . . . played the Sabal Game during those years?" he asked slowly.

Benjan's eyes narrowed. "Yes, I did." The game was ancient, revered, simplicity itself. It taught that the greater gain lay in working with others, rather than in self-seeking. He had always enjoyed it, but only a fool believed that such moral lessons extended to the cut and thrust of Fleet matters.

"It did not . . . bring you to community?"

"I got on well enough with the members of my team," Benjan said evenly.

"I hoped such isolation with a small group would calm your . . . spirit. Fleet is a community of men and women seeking enlightenment in the missions, just as you do. You are an exceptional person, anchored as you are in the station, using linkages we have not used—"

"Permitted, you mean."

"Those old techniques were deemed . . . too risky."

Benjan felt his many links like a background hum, in concert and warm. What could this man know of such methods time-savored by those who lived them? "And not easy to direct from above."

The man fastidiously raised a finger and persisted: "We still sit at the game, and while you are here would welcome your—

"Can we leave my spiritual progress aside?"

"Of course, if you desire."

"Fine. Now tell me who is getting my planet."

"Gray is not your planet."

"I speak for the station and all the intelligences who link with it. We made Gray. Through many decades, we hammered the crust, released the gases, planted the spores, damped the winds."

"With help."

"Three hundred of us at the start, and eleven heavy spacecraft. A puny beginning that blossomed into millions."

"Helped by the entire staff of Earthside—"

"They were Fleet men. They take orders, I don't. I work by contract."

"A contract spanning centuries?"

"It is still valid, though those who wrote it are dust."

"Let us treat this in a gentlemanly fashion, sir. Any contract can be renegotiated."

"The paper I—we, but I am here to speak for all—signed for Gray said it was to be an open colony. That's the only reason I worked on it," he said sharply.

"I would not advise you to pursue that point," Katonji said. He turned and studied the viewscreen, his broad, southern Chinese nose flaring at the nostrils. But the rest of his face remained an impassive mask. For a long moment there was only the thin whine of air circulation in the room.

"Sir," the other man said abruptly, "I can only tell you what the council has granted. Men of your talents are rare. We know that, had you undertaken the formation of Gray for a, uh, private interest, you would have demanded more payment."

"Wrong. I wouldn't have done it at all."

"Nonetheless, the council is willing to pay you a double fee. The Majiken Clan, who have been invested with Primacy Rights to Gray—"

"What!"

"—have seen fit to contribute the amount necessary to reimburse you—"

"So that's who—"

"—and all others of the station, to whom I have been authorized to release funds immediately."

Benjan stared blankly ahead for a short moment. "I believe I'll do a bit of releasing myself," he murmured, almost to himself.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing. Information?"

"Infor—oh."

"The Clans have a stranglehold on the council, but not the 3D. People might be interested to know how it came about that a new planet—a rich one, too—was handed over—"

"Officer Tozenji—"

Best to pause. Think. He shrugged, tried on a thin smile. "I was only jesting. Even idealists are not always stupid."

"Um. I am glad of that."

"Lodge the Majiken draft in my account. I want to wash my hands of this."

The other man said something, but Benjan was not listening. He made the ritual of leaving. They exchanged only perfunctory hand gestures. He turned to go, and wondered at the naked, flat room this man had chosen to work in: It carried no soft tones, no humanity, none of the feel of a room that is used, a place where men do work that interests them, so that they embody it with something of themselves. This office was empty in the most profound sense. It was a room for men who lived by taking orders. He hoped never to see such a place again.

Benjan turned. Stepped—the slow slide of falling, then catching himself, stepped—

You fall over Gray.

Skating down the steep banks of young clouds, searching, driving.

Luna you know as Gray, as all in station know it, because pearly clouds deck high in its thick air. It had been gray long before, as well—the aged pewter of rock hard-hammered for billions of years by the relentless sun. Now its air was like soft slate, cloaking the greatest of human handiworks.

You raise a hand, gaze at it. So much could come from so small an instrument. You marvel. A small tool, five-fingered slab, working over great stretches of centuries. Seen against the canopy of your craft, it seems an unlikely tool to heft worlds with—

And the thought alone sends you plunging—

Luna was born small, too small.

So the sun had readily stripped it of its early shroud of gas. Luna came from the collision of a Mars-sized world into the primordial Earth. From that colossal crunch—how you wish you could have seen that!—spun a disk, and from that churn, Luna condensed red-hot. The heat of that birth stripped away the moon's water and gases, leaving it bare to the sun's glower.

So amend that:

You steer a comet from the chilly freezer beyond Pluto, swing it around Jupiter, and smack it into the bleak fields of Mare Chrisium. In bits.

For a century, all hell breaks loose. You wait, patient in your station. It is a craft of fractions: Luna is smaller, so needs less to build an atmosphere.

There was always some scrap of gas on the moon—trapped from the solar wind, baked from its dust, perhaps even belched from the early, now long-dead volcanoes. When Apollo descended, bringing the first men, its tiny exhaust plume doubled the mass of the frail atmosphere.

Still, such a wan world could hold gases for tens of thousands of years; physics said so. Its lesser gravity tugs at a mere sixth of Earth's hefty grip. So, to begin, you sling inward a comet bearing a third the mass of all Earth's ample air, a chunk of mountain-sized grimy ice.

Sol's heat had robbed this world, but mother-massive Earth herself had slowly stolen away its spin. It became a submissive partner in a rigid gavotte, forever tide-locked with one face always smiling at its partner.

Here you use the iceteroid to double effect. By hooking the comet adroitly around Jupiter, in a reverse swingby, you loop it into an orbit opposite to the customary, docile way that worlds loop around the sun. Go opposite! Retro! Coming in on Luna, the iceball then has ten times the impact energy.

Mere days before it strikes, you blow it apart with meticulous brutality. Smashed to shards, chunks come gliding in all around Luna's equator, small enough that they cannot muster momentum enough to splatter free of gravity's grip. Huge cannonballs slam into gray rock, but at angles that prevent them from getting away again.

Earth admin was picky about this: no debris was to be flung free, to rain down as celestial buckshot on that favored world.

Within hours, Luna had air—of a crude sort. You mixed and salted and worked your chemical magicks upon roiling clouds that sported forked lightning. Gravity's grind provoked fevers, molecular riots.

More: as the pellets pelted down, Luna spun up. Its crust echoed with myriad slams and bangs. The old world creaked as it yielded, spinning faster from the hammering. From its lazy cycle of twenty-eight days it sped up to sixty hours—close enough to Earth-like, as they say, for government work. A day still lazy enough.

Even here, you orchestrated a nuanced performance, coaxed from dynamics. Luna's axial tilt had been a dull zero. Dutifully it had spun at right angles to the orbital plane of the solar system, robbed of summers and winters.

But you wanted otherwise. Angled just so, the incoming ice nuggets tilted the poles. From such simple mechanics, you conjured seasons. And as the gases cooled, icy caps crowned your work.

You were democratic, at first: allowing both water and carbon dioxide, with smidgens of methane and ammonia. Here you called upon the appetites of bacteria, sprites you sowed as soon as the winds calmed after bombardment. They basked in sunlight, broke up the methane. The greenhouse blanket quickly warmed the old gray rocks, coveting the heat from the infalls, and soon algae covered them.

You watched with pride as the first rain fell. For centuries, the dark plains had carried humanity's imposed, watery names: Tranquility, Serenity, Crises, Clouds, Storms. Now these lowlands of aged lava caught the rains and made muds and fattened into ponds, lakes, true seas. You made the ancient names come true.

Through your servant machines, you marched across these suddenly murky lands, bristling with an earned arrogance. They—*yourself!*—plowed and dug, sampled and salted. Through their eyes and tongues and ears, you sat in your high station and heard the sad baby sigh of the first winds awakening.

The station was becoming more than a bristling canister of metal, by then. Its agents grew, as did you.

You smiled down upon the gathering Gray with your quartz eyes and microwave antennas. For you knew what was coming. A mere sidewise glance at rich Earth told you what to expect.

Like Earth's tropics now, at Luna's equator heat drove moist gases aloft. Cooler gas flowed from the poles to fill in. The high wet clouds skated poleward, cooled—and rained down riches.

On Earth, such currents are robbed of their water about a third of the way to the poles, and so descend, their dry rasp making a world-wide belt of deserts. Not so on Luna.

You had judged the streams of newborn air rightly. Thicker airs than Earth's took longer to exhaust, and so did not fall until they reached the poles. Thus the new world had no chains of deserts, and one simple circulating air cell ground away in each hemisphere. Moisture worked its magicks.

You smiled to see your labors come right. Though anchored in your mammoth station, you felt the first pinpricks of awareness in the crawlers, flyers and diggers who probed the freshening moon.

You tasted their flavors, the brimming possibilities. Northerly winds swept the upper half of the globe, bearing poleward, then swerving toward the west to make the occasional mild tornado. (Not all weather should be boring.)

Clouds patrolled the air, still fretting over their uneasy births. Day and night came in their slow rhythm, stirring the biological lab that worked below. You sometimes took a moment from running all this, just to watch.

Lunascapes. Great Grayworld.

Where day yielded to dark, valleys sank into smoldering blackness. Already a chain of snowy peaks shone where they caught the sun's dimming rays, and lit the plains with slanting colors like live coals. Sharp mountains cleaved the cloud banks, leaving a wake like that of a huge ship. At the fat equator, straining still to adjust to the new spin, tropical thunderheads glowered, lit by orange lightning that seemed to be looking for a way to spark life among the drifting molecules.

All that you did, in a mere decade. You had made "the lesser light that rules the night" now shine five times brighter, casting sharp shadows on Earth. Sunrays glinted by day from the young oceans, dazzling the eyes on Earth. And the mother world itself reflected in those muddy seas, so that when the alignment was right, people on Earth's night side gazed up into their own mirrored selves. Viewed at just the right angle, Earth's image was rimmed with ruddy sunlight, refracting through Earth's air.

You knew it could not last, but were pleased to find that the new air stuck around. It would bleed away in ten thousand years, but by that time other measures could come into play. You had plans for a monolayer membrane to cap your work, resting atop the whole atmosphere, the largest balloon ever conceived.

Later? No, act in the moment—and so you did.

You wove it with membrane skill, cast it wide, let it fall—to rest easy on the thick airs below. Great holes in it let ships glide to and fro, but the losses from those would be trivial.

Not that all was perfect. Luna had no soil, only the damaged dust left from four billion years beneath the solar wind's anvil.

After a mere momentary decade (nothing, to you), fresh wonders bloomed.

Making soil from gritty grime was work best left to the micro-beasts who loved such stuff. To do great works on a global scale took tiny assistants. You fashioned them in your own labs, which poked outward from the station's many-armed skin.

Gray grew a crust. Earth is in essence a tissue of microbial organisms living off the sun's fires. Gray would do the same, in fast-forward. You cooked up not mere primordial broths, but endless chains of regulatory messages, intricate feedback loops, organic gavottes.

Earth hung above, an example of life ornamented by elaborate decorations, structures of forest and grass and skin and blood—living quarters, like seagrass and zebras and eucalyptus and primates.

Do the same, you told yourself. *Only better.*

These tasks you loved. Their conjuring consumed more decades, stacked end on end. You were sucked into the romance of tiny turf wars, chemical assaults, microbial murders, and invasive incests. But you had to play upon the stellar stage, as well.

You had not thought about the tides. Even you had not found a way around those outcomes of gravity's gradient. Earth raised bulges in Gray's seas a full twenty meters tall. That made for a dim future for coastal property, even once the air became breathable.

Luckily, even such colossal tides were not a great bother to the lakes you shaped in crater beds. These you made as breeding farms for the bioengineered minions who ceaselessly tilled the dirts, massaged the gases, filtered the tinkling streams that cut swift ways through rock.

Indeed, here and there you even found a use for the tides. There were more watts lurking there, in kinetic energy. You fashioned push-plates to tap some of it, to run your sub-stations. Thrifty gods do not have to suck up to (and from) Earthside.

And so the sphere that, when you began, had been the realm of strip miners and mass-driver camps, of rugged, suited loners . . . became a place where, someday, humans might walk and breathe free.

That time is about to come. You yearn for it. For you, too, can then manifest yourself, your station, as a mere mortal . . . and set foot upon a world that you would name Selene.

You were both station and more, by then. How much more few knew. But some sliver of you clung to the name of Benjan—

—Benjan nodded slightly, ears ringing for some reason.

The smooth, sure interviewer gave a short introduction. "Man . . . or manifestation? This we must all wonder as we greet an embodiment of humanity's greatest—and now ancient—construction project. One you and I can see every evening in the sky—for those who are still surface dwellers."

The 3D cameras moved in smooth arcs through the studio darkness beyond. Two men sat in a pool of light. The interviewer spoke toward the directional mike as he gave the background on Benjan's charges against the council.

Smiles galore. Platitudes aplenty. That done, came the attack.

"But isn't this a rather abstract, distant point to bring at this time?" the man said, turning to Benjan.

Benjan blinked, uncertain, edgy. He was a private man, used to working alone. Now that he was moving against the council he had to bear these public appearances, these . . . manifestations . . . of a dwindled self. "To, ah, the people of the next generation, Gray will not be an abstraction—"

"You mean the moon?"

"Uh, yes, Gray is my name for it. That's the way it looked when I—uh, we all—started work on it centuries ago."

"Yet you were there all along, in fact."

"Well, yes. But when I'm—we're—done," Benjan leaned forward, and his interviewer leaned back, as if not wanting to be too close, "it will be a real place, not just an idea—where you all can live and start a planned ecology. It will be a frontier."

"We understand that romantic tradition, but—"

"No, you don't. Gray isn't just an idea, it's something I've—we've—worked on for everyone, whatever shape or genetype they might favor."

"Yes yes, and such ideas are touching in their, well, customary way, but—"

"But the only ones who will ever enjoy it, if the council gets away with this, is the Majiken Clan."

The interviewer pursed his lips. Or was this a *he* at all? In the current style, the bulging muscles and thick neck might just be fashion statements. "Well, the Majiken are a very large, important segment of the—"

"No more important than the rest of humanity, in my estimation."

"But to cause this much stir over a world that will not even be habitable for at least decades more—"

"We of the station are there now."

"You've been modified, adapted."

"Well, yes. I couldn't do this interview on Earth. I'm grav-adapted."

"Frankly, that's why many feel that we need to put Earthside people on the ground on Luna as soon as possible. To represent our point of view."

"Look, Gray's not just any world. Not just a gas giant, useful for raw gas and nothing else. Not a Mercury type; there are millions of those littered out among the stars. Gray is going to be fully Earthlike. The astronomers tell us there are only four semiterrestrials outside the home system that humans can ever live on, around other stars, and those are pretty terrible. I—"

"You forget the Outer Colonies," the interviewer broke in smoothly, smiling at the 3D.

"Yeah—iceballs." He could not hide his contempt. What he wanted to say, but knew it was terribly old fashioned, was: *Damn it, Gray is happening now, we've got to plan for it. Photosynthesis is going on. I've seen it myself—hell, I* caused *it myself—carbon dioxide and water converting into organics and oxygen, gases fresh as a breeze. Currents carry the algae down through the cloud layers into the warm areas, where they work just fine. That gives off simple carbon compounds, raw carbon and water. This keeps the water content of the atmosphere constant, but converts carbon dioxide—we've got too much right now—into carbon and oxygen. It's going well, the rate itself is exponentiating—*

Benjan shook his fist, just now realizing that he *was* saying all this out loud, after all. Probably not a smart move, but he couldn't stop himself. "Look, there's enough water in Gray's deep rock to make an ocean a meter deep all the way around the planet. That's enough to resupply the atmospheric loss, easy, even without breaking up the rocks. Our designer plants are doing their jobs."

"We have heard of these routine miracles—"

"—and there can be belts of jungle—soon! We've got mountains for climbing, rivers that snake, polar caps, programmed animals coming up, beautiful sunsets, soft summer storms—anything the human race wants. That's the vision we had when we started Gray. And I'm damned if I'm going to let the Majiken—"

"But the Majiken can defend Gray," the interviewer said mildly.

Benjan paused. "Oh, you mean—"

"Yes, the ever-hungry Outer Colonies. Surely if Gray proves as extraordinary as you think, the rebellious colonies will attempt to take it." The man gave Benjan a broad, insincere smile. *Dummy*, it said. *Don't know the realpolitic of this time, do you?*

He could see the logic. Earth had gotten soft, fed by a tougher empire that now stretched to the chilly preserve beyond Pluto. To keep their manicured lands clean and "original," Earthers had burrowed underground, built deep cities there, and sent most manufacturing off-world. The real economic muscle now lay in the hands of the suppliers of fine rocks and volatiles, shipped on long orbits from the Outers and the Belt. These realities were hard to remember when your attention was focused on the details of making a fresh world. One forgot that appetites ruled, not reason.

Benjan grimaced. "The Majiken fight well, they are the backbone of the fleet, yes. Still, to give them a *world*—"

"Surely in time there will be others," the man said reasonably.

"Oh? Why should there be? We can't possibly make Venus work, and Mars will take thousands of years more—"

"No, I meant built worlds—stations."

He snorted. "Live inside a can?"

"That's what you do," the man shot back.

"I'm . . . different."

"Ah yes." The interviewer bore in, lips compressed to a white line, and the 3Ds followed him, snouts peering. Benjan felt hopelessly outmatched. "And just how so?"

"I'm . . . a man chosen to represent . . ."

"The Shaping Station, correct?"

"I'm of the breed who have always lived in and for the station."

"Now, that's what I'm sure our audience really wants to get into. After all, the moon won't be ready for a long time. But you—an ancient artifact, practically—are more interesting."

"I don't want to talk about that." Stony, frozen.

"Why not?" Not really a question.

"It's personal."

"You're here as a public figure!"

"Only because you require it. Nobody wants to talk to the station directly."

"We do not converse with such strange machines."

"It's not just a machine."

"Then what is it?"

"An . . . idea," he finished lamely. "An . . . ancient one." How to tell them? Suddenly, he longed to be back doing a solid, worthy job—flying a jet in Gray's skies, pushing along the organic chemistry—

The interviewer looked uneasy. "Well, since you won't go there . . . our time's almost up and—"

Again, I am falling over Gray.

Misty auburn clouds, so thin they might be only illusion, spread below the ship. They caught red as dusk fell. The thick air refracted six times more than Earth's, so sunsets had a slow-motion grandeur, the full palette of pinks and crimsons and rouge-reds.

I am in a ramjet—the throttled growl is unmistakable—lancing cleanly into the upper atmosphere. Straps tug and pinch me as the craft banks and sweeps, the smoothly wrenching way I like it, the stubby snout sipping precisely enough for the air's growing oxygen fraction to keep the engine thrusting forward.

I probably should not have come on this flight; it is an uncharacteristic self-indulgence. But I could not sit forever in the station to plot and plan and calculate and check. I had to see my handiwork, get the feel of it. To use my body in the way it longed for.

I make the ramjet arc toward Gray's night side. The horizon curves away, clean hard blue-white, and—*chung!*—I take a jolt as the first canister blows off the underbelly below my feet. Through a rearview camera I watch it tumble away into ruddy oblivion. The canister carries more organic cultures, a new matrix I selected carefully back on the station, in my expanded mode. I watch the shiny morsel explode below, yellow flash. It showers intricate, tailored algae through the clouds.

Gray is at a crucial stage. Since the centuries-ago slamming by the air-giving comets, the conspiracy of spin, water, and heat (great gifts of astro-engineering) had done their deep work. Volcanoes now simmered, percolating more moisture from deep within, kindling, kindling. Some heat climbed to the high cloud decks and froze into thin crystals.

There, I conjure fresh life—tinkering, endlessly.

Life, yes. Carefully engineered cells, to breathe carbon dioxide and live off the traces of other gases this high from the surface. In time. Photosynthesis in the buoyant forms—gas-bag trees, spindly but graceful in the top layer of Gray's dense air—conjure carbon dioxide into oxygen.

I glance up, encased in the tight flight jacket, yet feeling utterly free, naked. *Incoming meteors.* Brown clouds of dust I had summoned to orbit about Gray were cutting off some sunlight.

Added spice, these—ingredients sent from the asteroids to pepper the soil, prick the air, speed chemical matters along. The surface was cooling, the Gray greenhouse winding down. Losing the heat from the atmosphere's birth took centuries. *Patience, prudence.*

Now chemical concerts in the rocks slowed. I felt those, too, as a distant sampler hailed me with its accountant's chattering details. Part of the song. Other chem chores, more subtle, would soon become energetically possible. Fluids could seep and run. In the clotted air below, crystals and cells would make their slow work. All in time. . . .

In time, the first puddle had become a lake. How I had rejoiced then!

Centuries ago, I wanted to go swimming in the clear blue seas of Luna, I remember. Tropical waters at the equator, under Earthshine. . . .

What joy it had been, to fertilize those early, still waters with minutely programmed bacteria, stir and season their primordial soup—and wait.

What sweet mother Earth did in a billion years, I did to Gray in fifty. Joyfully! Singing the song of the molecules, in concert with them.

My steps were many, the methods subtle. To shape the mountain ranges, I needed further infalls from small asteroids, taking a century—ferrying rough-cut stone to polish a jewel.

Memories . . . of a man and more. Fashioned from the tick of time, ironed out by the swift passage of mere puny years, of decades, of the ringing centuries. Worlds take *time.*

My ramjet leaps into night, smelling of hot iron and—*chung!*—discharging its burden.

I glance down at wisps of yellow-pearl. Sulphuric and carbolic acid streamers, drifting far below. There algae feed and prosper. Murky mists below pale, darken, vanish. *Go!*

Yet I felt a sudden sadness as the jet took me up again. I had watched every small change in the atmosphere, played shepherd to newborn cloud banks, raised fresh chains of volcanoes with fusion triggers that burrowed like moles—and all this might come to naught, if it became another private preserve for some Earthside power games.

I could not shake off the depression. Should I have that worry pruned away? It could hamper my work, and I could easily be rid of it for a while, when I returned to the sleeping vaults. Most in the station spent about one month per year working. Their other days passed in dreamless chilled sleep, waiting for the slow metabolism of Gray to quicken and change.

Not I. I slept seldom, and did not want the stacks of years washed away.

I run my tongue over fuzzy teeth. I am getting stale, worn. Even a ramjet ride did not revive my spirit.

And the station did not want slackers. Not only memories could be pruned.

Ancient urges arise, needs. . . .

A warm shower and rest await me above, in orbit, inside the mother-skin. Time to go.

I touch the controls, cutting in extra ballistic computer capacity and—

—suddenly I am there again, with *her*.
She is around me and beneath me, slick with ruby sweat.
And the power of it soars up through me. I reach out and her breast blossoms in my eager hand, her soft cries unfurl in puffs of green steam. *Aye!*
She is a splash of purple across the cool lunar stones, her breath ringing in me—
as she licks my rasping ear with a tiny jagged fork of puckered laughter, most joyful and triumphant, yea verily.
The station knows you need this now.

Yes, and the station is right. I need to be consumed, digested, spat back
out a new and fresh man, so that I may work well again.
—so she coils and swirls like a fine tinkling gas around me, her mouth
wraps me like a vortex. I slide my shaft into her gratefully
as she sobs great wracking orange gaudiness through me,
her, again, *her,*
gift of the strumming vast blue station that guides us all down centuries
of dense, oily time.
You need this, take, eat, this is the body and blood of the station, eat, savor,
take fully.
I had known her once—redly, sweet, and loud—and now I know her again,
my senses all piling up and waiting to be eaten from her.
I glide back and forth, moisture chimes between us, *she* is coiled tight, too.
We all are, we creatures of the station.
It knows this, releases us when we must be gone.
I slam myself into *her* because *she* is both that woman—known so long
ago,
delicious in her whirlwind passions, supple in colors of the mind, singing
in rubs and heats
I knew across the centuries. So the station came to know *her*, too, and
duly recorded her—
so that I can now bury my coal-black, sweaty troubles in her, *aye!*
and thus in the Shaping Station,
as was and ever shall be, Grayworld without end, amen.

Resting. Compiling himself again, letting the rivulets of self knit up into remembrance.

Of course the station had to be more vast and able than anything humanity had yet known.

At the time the Great Shaping began, it was colossal. By then, humanity had gone on to grander projects.

Mars brimmed nicely with vapors and lichen, but would take millennia more before anyone could walk its surface with only a compressor to take and thicken oxygen from the swirling airs.

Mammoth works now cruised at the outer rim of the solar system, vast ice castles inhabited by beings only dimly related to the humans of Earth.

He did not know those constructions. But he had been there, in inherited memory, when the station was born. For part of him and you and me and us had voyaged forth at the very beginning. . . .

The numbers were simple, their implications known to school children.

(Let's remember that the future belongs to the engineers.)

Take an asteroid, say, and slice it sidewise, allowing four meters of head room for each level—about what a human takes to live in. This dwelling, then, has floor space that expands as the cube of the asteroid size. How big an asteroid could provide the living room equal to the entire surface of the Earth? Simple: about two hundred kilometers.

Nothing, in other words. For Ceres, the largest asteroid in the inner belt, was 380 kilometers across, before humans began to work her.

But room was not the essence of the station. For after all, he had made the station, yes? Information was her essence, the truth of that blossomed in him, the past as prologue—

* * *

He ambled along a corridor a hundred meters below Gray's slag and muds, gazing down on the frothy air-fountains in the foyer. *Day's work done.*

Even manifestations need a rest, and the interview with the smug Earther had put him off, sapping his resolve. Inhaling the crisp, cold air (a bit high on the oxy, he thought; have to check that), he let himself concentrate wholly on the clear scent of the splashing. The blue water was the very best, fresh from the growing poles, not the recycled stuff he endured on flights. He breathed in the tingling spray and a man grabbed him.

"I present formal secure-lock," the man growled, his third knuckle biting into Benjan's elbow port.

A cold, brittle *thunk*. His systems froze. Before he could move, whole command linkages went dead in his inboards. The station's hovering presence, always humming in the distance, telescoped away. It felt like a wrenching fall that never ends, head over heels—

He got a grip. *Focus. Regain your links. The loss!* —It was like having fingers chopped away, whole pieces of himself amputated. *Bloody neural stumps—*

He sent quick, darting questions down his lines, and met . . . *dark.* Silent. Dead.

His entire aura of presence was gone. He sucked in the cold air, letting a fresh anger bubble up but keeping it tightly bound.

His attacker was the sort who blended into the background. Perfect for this job. A nobody out of nowhere, complete surprise. Clipping on a hand-restraint, the mousy man stepped back. "They ordered me to do it fast." A mousy voice, too.

Benjan resisted the impulse to deck him. He looked Lunar, thin and pale. One of the Earther families who had come to deal with the station a century ago? Maybe with more kilos than Benjan, but a fair match. And it would feel *good.*

But that would just bring more of them, in the end. "Damn it, I have immunity from casual arrest. I—"

"No matter now, they said." The cop shrugged apologetically, but his jaw set. He was used to this.

Benjan vaguely recognized him, from some bar near the Apex of the crater's dome. There weren't more than a thousand people on Gray, mostly like him, manifestations of the station. But not all. More of the others all the time. . . . "You're Majiken."

"Yeah. So?"

"At least you people do your own work."

"We have plenty on the inside here. You don't think Gray's gonna be neglected, eh?'

In his elbow, he felt injected programs spread, *clunk,* consolidating their blocks. A seeping ache. Benjan fought it all through his neuro-musculars, but the disease was strong.

Keep your voice level, wait for a chance. Only one of them—my God, they're sure of themselves! Okay, make yourself seem like a doormat.

"I don't suppose I can get a few things from my office?"

"'Fraid not."

"Mighty decent."

The man shrugged, letting the sarcasm pass. "They want you locked down good before they. . . ."

"They what?"

"Make their next move, I'd guess."

"I'm just a step, eh?"

"Sure, chop off the hands and feet first." A smirking thug with a gift for metaphor.

Well, these hands and feet can still work. Benjan began walking toward his apartment. "I'll stay in your lock-down, but at home."

"Hey, nobody said—"

"But what's the harm? I'm deadened now." He kept walking.

"Uh, uh—" The man paused, obviously consulting with his superiors on an in-link.

He should have known it was coming. The Majikens were ferret-eyed, canny, unoriginal, and always dangerous. He had forgotten that. In the rush to get ores sifted, grayscapes planed right to control the constant rains, a system of streams and rivers snaking through the fresh-cut valleys . . . a man could get distracted, yes. Forget how people were. *Careless.*

Not completely, though. Agents like this Luny usually nailed their prey at home, not in a hallway. Benjan kept a stunner in the apartment, right beside the door, convenient.

Distract him. "I want to file a protest."

"Take it to Kalespon." Clipped, efficient, probably had a dozen other slices of bad news to deliver today. To other manifestations. Busy man.

"No, with your boss."

"Mine?" His rock-steady jaw went slack.

"For—" he sharply turned the corner to his apartment, using the time to reach for some mumbo-jumbo— "felonious interrogation of inboards."

"Hey, I didn't touch your—"

"I felt it. Slimy little gropes—yeccch!" Might as well ham it up a little, have some fun.

The Majiken looked offended. "I never violate protocols. The integrity of your nexus is intact. You can ask for a scope-through when we take you in—"

"I'll get my overnight kit." Only now did he hurry toward the apartment portal and popped it by an inboard command. As he stepped through he felt the cop, three steps behind.

Here goes. One foot over the lip, turn to the right, snatch the stunner out of its grip mount—

—and it wasn't there. They'd laundered the place already. "Damn!"

"Thought it'd be waitin', huh?"

In the first second. When the Majiken was pretty sure of himself, act—

Benjan took a step back and kicked. A satisfying soft *thuuunk.*

In the low gravity, the man rose a meter and his *uungh!* was strangely satisfying. The Majiken were warriors, after all, by heritage. Easier for them to take physical damage than life trauma.

The Majiken came up fast and nailed Benjan with a hand feint and slam. Benjan fell back in the slow gravity—and at a 45-degree tilt, sprang backward, away, toward the wall—

Which he hit, completing his turn in air, heels coming hard into the wall so that he could absorb the recoil—

—and spring off, head-height—

—into the Majiken's throat as the man rushed forward, shaped hands ready for the put-away blow. Benjan caught him with both hand-edges, slamming the throat from both sides. The punch cut off blood to the head and the Majiken crumbled.

Benjan tied him with his own belt. Killed the link on the screen. Bound him further to the furniture. Even on Gray, inertia was inertia. The Majiken would not find it easy to get out from under a couch he was firmly tied to.

The apartment would figure out that something was wrong about its occupant in a hour or two, and call for help. Time enough to run? Benjan was unsure, but part of him liked this, felt a surge of adrenaline joy arc redly through his systems.

Five minutes of work and he got the interlocks off. His connections sprang back to life. Colors and images sang in his aura.

He was out the door, away—

The cramped corridors seemed to shrink, dropping down and away from him, weaving and collapsing. Something came toward him—chalk-white hills, yawning craters.

A hurricane breath whipped by him as it swept down from the jutting, fresh-carved mountains. His body strained.

He was running, that much seeped through to him. He breathed brown murk that seared but his lungs sucked it in eagerly.

Plunging hard and heavy across the swampy flesh of Gray.

He moved easily, bouncing with each stride in the light gravity, down an infinite straight line between rows of enormous trees. Vegetable trees, these were, soft tubers and floppy leaves in the wan glow of a filtered sun. There should be no men here, only machines to tend the crops. Then he noticed that he was not a man at all. A robo-hauler, yes—and his legs were in fact wheels, his arms the working grapplers. Yet he read all this as his running body. Somehow it was pleasant.

And *she* ran with him.

He saw beside him a miner-bot, speeding down the slope. Yet he knew it was *she*, Martine, and he loved her.

He whirred, clicked—and sent a hail.

You are fair, my sweet.

Back from the lumbering miner came, *This body will not work well at games of lust.*

No reason we can't shed them in time.

To what end? she demanded. Always imperious, that girl.

To slide silky skin again.

You seem to forget that we are fleeing. That cop, someone will find him.

In fact, he had forgotten. *Uh . . . update me?*

Ah! How exasperating! You've been off, romping through your imputs again, right?

Worse than that. He had only a slippery hold on the jiggling, surging lands of mud and murk that funneled past. Best not to alarm her, though. *My sensations seem to have become a bit scrambled, yes. I know there is some reason to run—*

They are right behind us!

Who?

The Majiken Clan! They want to seize you as a primary manifestation!

Damn! I'm fragmenting.

You mean they're reaching into your associative cortex?

Must be, my love. Which is why you're running with me.

What do you mean?

How to tell her the truth but shade it so that she does not guess . . . the Truth? *Suppose I tell you something that is more useful than accurate?*

Why would you do that, m'love?

Why do doctors slant a diagnosis?

Because no good diagnostic gives a solid prediction.

Exactly. Not what he had meant, but it got them by an awkward fact.

Come on, she sent. *Let's scamper down this canyon. The topo maps say it's a short cut.*

Can't trust 'em, the rains slice up the land so fast. He felt his legs springing like pistons in the mad buoyance of adrenaline.

They surged together down slippery sheets that festered with life—spreading algae, some of the many-leafed slim-trees Benjan had himself helped design. Rank growths festooned the banks of dripping slime, biology run wild and woolly at a fevered pace, irked by infusions of smart bugs. A landscape on fast forward.

What do you fear so much? she said suddenly

The sharpness of it stalls his mind. He was afraid for her more than himself, but how to tell her? This apparition of her was so firm and heartbreakingly warm, her whole presence welling through to him on his sensorium.... Time to tell another truth that conceals a deeper truth.

They'll blot out every central feature of me, all those they can find.

If *they catch you. Us.*

Yup. Keep it to monosyllables, so the tremor of his voice does not give itself away. If they got to her, she would face final, total erasure. Even of a fragment self.

Save your breath for the run, she sent. So he did, gratefully.

If there were no omni-sensors lurking along this approach to the launch fields, they might get through. Probably Fleet expected him to stay indoors, hiding, working his way to some help. But there would be no aid there. The Majikan were thorough and would capture all human manifestations, timing the arrests simultaneously to prevent anyone sending a warning. That was why they had sent a lone cop to grab him; they were stretched thin. Reassuring, but not much.

It was only three days past the 3D interview, yet they had decided to act and put together a sweep. What would they be doing to the station itself? He ached at the thought. After all, *she* resided there....

And *she* was here. He was talking to a manifestation that was remarkable, because he had opened his inputs in a way that only a crisis can spur.

Benjan grimaced. Decades working over Gray had aged him, taught him things Fleet could not imagine. The Sabal Game still hummed in his mind, still guided his thoughts, but these men of the Fleet had betrayed all that. They thought, quite probably, that they could recall him to full officer status, and he would not guess that they would then silence him, quite legally.

Did they think him so slow? Benjan allowed himself a thin, dry chuckle as he ran.

They entered the last short canyon before the launch fields. Tall blades like scimitar grasses poked up, making him dart among them. She growled and spun her tracks and plowed them under. She did not speak. None of them liked to destroy the life so precariously remaking Gray. Each crushed blade was a step backward.

His quarters were many kilometers behind by now, and soon these green fields would end. If he had judged the map correctly—yes, there it was. A craggy peak ahead, crowned with the somber lights of the launch station. They would be operating a routine shift in there, not taking any special precautions.

Abruptly, he burst from the thicket of thick-leafed plants and charged down the last slope. Before him lay the vast lava plain of Oberg Plateau, towering above the Fogg Sea. Now it was a mud flat, foggy, littered with ships. A vast dark hole yawned in the bluff nearby, the slanting sunlight etching its rimmed locks. It must be the exit tube for the electromagnetic accelerator, now obsolete, unable to fling any more loads of ore through the cloak of atmosphere.

A huge craft loomed at the base of the bluff. A cargo vessel probably; far too large and certainly too slow. Beyond lay an array of robot communications vessels, without the bubble of a life support system. He rejected those, too, ran on.

She surged behind him. They kept electromagnetic silence now.

His breath came faster and he sucked at the thick, cold air, then had to stop for a moment in the shadow of the cruiser to catch his breath. Above he thought he could make out the faint green tinge of the atmospheric cap in the membrane that held Gray's air. He would have to find his way out through the holes in it, too, in an unfamiliar ship.

He glanced around, searching. To the side stood a small craft, obviously Jump type. No one worked at its base. In the murky fog that shrouded the mud flat he could see a few men and robo-servers beside nearby ships. They would wonder what he was up to. He decided to risk it. He broke from cover and ran swiftly to the small ship. The hatch opened easily.

Gaining lift with the ship was not simple, and so he called on his time-sense accelerations, to the max. That would cost him mental energy later. Right now, he wanted to be sure there was a *later* at all.

Roaring flame drove him into the pearly sky.

Finding the exit hole in the membrane proved easier. He flew by pure eyeballed grace, slamming the acceleration until it was nearly a straight-line problem, like shooting a rifle. Fighting a mere sixth of a *g* had many advantages.

And now, where to go?

A bright arc flashed behind Benjan's eyelids, showing the fans of purpling blood vessels. He heard the dark, whispering sounds of an inner void. A pit opened beneath him and the falling sensation began—he had run over the boundaries this body could attain. His mind had overpowered the shrieking demands of the muscles and nerves, and now he was shutting down, harking to the body's calls. . . .

And *she*?

I am here, m'love. The voice came warm and moist, wrapping him in it as he faded, faded, into a gray of his own making.

She greeted him at the station.
She held shadowed inlets of rest. A cup brimming with water,
a distant chime of bells, the sweet damp air of early morning.
He remembered it so well, the ritual of meditation in his fleet training,
the days of quiet devotion through simple duties that strengthened the
mind.
Everything had been of a piece then.
Before Gray grew to greatness, before conflict and aching doubt,
before the storm that raged red through his mind, like—

—Wind, snarling his hair, a hard winter afternoon as he walked back to his quarters. . . .

—then, instantly, the cold prickly sensation of diving through shimmering spheres of water in zero gravity. The huge bubbles trembled and refracted the yellow light into his eyes. He laughed.

—scalding black rock faces rose on Gray. Wedges thrust upward as the tortured skin of the planet writhed and buckled. He watched it by remote camera, seeing only a few hundred yards through the choking clouds of carbon dioxide. He felt the rumble of earthquakes, the ominous murmur of a mountain chain being born.

—a man running, scuttling like an insect across the tortured face of Gray. Above him the great membrane clasped the atmosphere, pressing it down on him, *pinning him, a beetle beneath glass. But it is Fleet that wishes to pin him* there, to snarl him in the threads of duty. And as the ship arcs upward at the sky he feels a tide of joy, of freedom.

—twisted shrieking trees, leaves like leather and apples that gleam blue. Moisture beading on fresh crimson grapes beneath a white-hot star.

—sharp synapses, ferrite cores, spinning drums of cold electrical memory. Input and output. Copper terminals (male or female?), scanners, channels, electrons pouring through p-n-p junctions. Memory mired in quantum noise.

Index. Catalog. Transform. Fourier components, the infinite wheeling dance of Laplace and Gauss and Hermite.

And through it all she is there with him, through centuries to keep him whole and sane and yet he does not know, across such vaults of time and space . . . who is he?

Many: us. One: I. Others: you. *Did you think that the marriage of true organisms and fateful machines with machine minds would make a thing that could at last know itself? This is a new order of being but it is not a god.*

Us: one, We: you, He: I.

And yet you suspect you are . . . different . . . somehow.

The Majiken ships were peeling off from their orbits, skating down through the membrane holes, into *my* air!

They gazed down, tense and wary, these shock troops in their huddled lonely carriages. Not up, where I lurk.

For I am iceball and stony-frag, fruit of the icesteroids. Held in long orbit for just such a (then) far future. (Now) arrived.

Down I fall in my myriads. Through the secret membrane passages I/we/you made decades before, knowing that a bolthole is good. And that bolts slam true in both directions.

Down, down—through gray decks I have cooked, artful ambrosias, pewter terraces I have sculpted to hide my selves as they guide the rocks and bergs—*after them!*—

The Majiken ships, ever-wary of fire from below, never thinking to glance up. I fall upon them in machine-gun violences, my ices and stones ripping their craft, puncturing. They die in round-mouthed surprise, these warriors.

I, master of hyperbolic purpose, shred them.

I, orbit-master to Gray.

Conflict has always provoked anxiety within him, a habit he could never correct, and so:

—in concert we will rise to full congruence with F(x)
and sum over all variables and integrate over the contour
encapsulating all singularities. It is right and meet so to do.
He sat comfortably, rocking on his heels in meditation position.
Water dripped in a cistern nearby and he thought his mantra,
letting the sound curl up from within him. A thought entered,

flickered across his mind as though a bird, and left.
She she she she
The mantra returned in its flowing green rhythmic beauty and he entered
the crystal state of thought within thought,
consciousness regarding itself without detail or structure.
The air rested upon him, the earth groaned beneath with the weight of continents,
shouting sweet stars wheeled in a chanting cadence above.
He was in place and focused, man and boy and elder at once,
officer of Fleet, mind encased in matter, body summed into mind
—and *she* came to him, cool balm of aid, succor, yet beneath her palms his muscles warmed, warmed—

His universe slides into night. Circuits close. Oscillating electrons carry information, senses, fragments of memory.

I swim in the blackness. There are long moments of no sensations, nothing to see or hear or feel. I grope—

Her? No, she is not here either. Cannot be. For she has been dead these centuries and lives only in your station, where she knows not what has become of herself.

At last, I seize upon some frag, will it to expand. A strange watery vision floats into view. A man is peering at him. There is no detail behind the man, only a blank white wall. He wears the blue uniform of Fleet and he cocks an amused eyebrow at:

Benjan.

"Recognize me?" the man says.

"Of course. Hello, Katonji, you bastard."

"Ah, rancor. A nice touch. Unusual in a computer simulation, even one as sophisticated as this."

"What? Comp—"

And Benjan knows who he is.

In a swirling instant he sends out feelers. He finds boundaries, cool gray walls he cannot penetrate, dead patches, great areas of gray emptiness, of no memory. What did he look like when he was young? Where was his first home located? That girl—at age fifteen? Was that *her? Her?* He grasps for her—

And knows. He cannot answer. He does not know. He is only a piece of Benjan.

"You see now? Check it. Try something—to move your arm, for instance. You haven't got arms." Katonji makes a thin smile. "Computer simulations do not have bodies, though they have some of the perceptions that come from bodies."

"P—perceptions from where?"

"From the fool Benjan, of course."

"*Me*."

"*He* didn't realize, having burned up all that time on Gray, that we can penetrate all diagnostics. Even the station's. Technologies, even at the level of sentient molecular plasmas, have logs and files. Their data is not closed to certain lawful parties."

He swept an arm (not a real one, of course) at the man's face. Nothing. No contact. All right, then. . . . "And these feelings are—"

"Mere memories. Bits from Benjan's station self." Katonji smiles wryly.

He stops, horrified. He does not exist. He is only binary bits of information scattered in ferrite memory cores. He has no substance, is without flesh. "But . . . but, where is the real me?" he says at last.

"That's what you're going to tell us."

"I don't know. I was . . . falling. Yes, over Gray—"

"And running, yes—I know. That was a quick escape, an unexpectedly neat solution."

"It worked," Benjan said, still in a daze. "But it wasn't me?"

"In a way it was. I'm sure the real Benjan has devised some clever destination, and some tactics. You—his ferrite inner self—will tell us, *now,* what he will do next."

"He's got something, yes. . . . "

"Speak *now,*" Katonji said impatiently.

Stall for time. "I need to know more."

"This is a calculated opportunity," Katonji said off-handedly. "We had hoped Benjan would put together a solution from things he had been thinking about recently, and apparently it worked."

"So you have breached the station?" Horror flooded him, black bile.

"Oh, you aren't a complete simulation of Benjan, just recently stored conscious data and a good bit of subconscious motivation. A truncated personality, it is called."

As Katonji speaks, Benjan sends out tracers and feels them flash through his being. He summons up input and output. There are slabs of useless data, a latticed library of the mind. He can expand in polynomials, integrate along an orbit, factorize, compare coefficients—*so they used my computational self to make up part of this shambling construct.*

More. He can fix his field—there, just so—and fold his hands, repeating his mantra. Sound wells up and folds over him, encasing him in a moment of silence. *So the part of me that still loves the Sabal Game, feels drawn to the one-is-all side of being human—they got that, too.*

Panic. Do something. Slam on the brakes—

He registers Katonji's voice, a low drone that becomes deeper and deeper as time slows. The world outside stills. His thought processes are far faster than an ordinary man's. He can control his perception rate.

Somehow, even though he is a simulation, he can tap the real Benjan's method of meditation, at least to accelerate his time sense. He feels a surge of anticipation. He hums the mantra again and feels the world around him alter. The trickle of input through his circuits slows and stops. He is running cool and smooth. He feels himself cascading down through ruby-hot levels of perception, flashing back through Benjan's memories.

He speeds himself. He lives again the moments over Gray. He dives through the swampy atmosphere and swims above the world he made. Molecular master, he is awash in the sight-sound-smell, an ocean of perception.

Katonji is still saying something. Benjan allows time to alter again and Katonji's drone returns, rising—

Benjan suddenly perceives something behind Katonji's impassive features. "Why didn't you follow Benjan immediately? You could find out where he was going. You could have picked him up before he scrambled your tracker beams."

Katonji smiles slightly. "Quite perceptive, aren't you? Understand, we wish only Benjan's compliance."

"But if he died, he would be even more silent."

"Precisely so. I see you are a good simulation."

"I seem quite real to myself."

"Ha! Don't we all. A computer who jests. Very much like Benjan, you are. I will have to speak to you in detail, later. I would like to know just why he failed us so badly. But for the moment we must know where he is now. He is a legend, and can be allowed neither to escape nor to die."

Benjan feels a tremor of fear.

"So where did he flee? You're the closest model of Benjan."

I summon winds from the equator, cold banks of sullen cloud from the poles, and bid them *crash*. They slam together to make a tornado such as never seen on Earth. Lower gravity, thicker air—a cauldron. It twirls and snarls and spits out lightning knives. The funnel touches down, kisses my crust—

—and there are Majiken beneath, whole canisters of them, awaiting my kiss.

Everyone talks about the weather, but only I do anything about it.

They crack open like ripe fruit.

—and you dwindle again, hiding from their pursuing electrons. Falling away into your microstructure.

They do not know how much they have captured. They think in terms of bits and pieces and he/you/we/I are not. So they do not know this—

You knew this had to come
As worlds must turn
And primates must prance
And givers must grab
So they would try to wrap their world around yours.
They are not dumb.
And smell a beautiful beast slouching toward Bethlehem.

Benjan coils in upon himself. He has to delay Katonji. He must lie—

—and at this rogue thought, scarlet circuits fire. Agony. Benjan flinches as truth verification overrides trigger inside himself.

"I warned you." Katonji smiles, lips thin and dry.

Let them kill me.

"You'd like that, I know. No, you will yield up your little secrets."

Speak. Don't just let him read your thoughts. "Why can't you find him?"

"We do not know. Except that your sort of intelligence has gotten quite out of control, that we do know. We will take it apart gradually, to understand it—you, I suppose, included."

"You will . . ."

"Peel you, yes. There will be nothing left. To avoid that, tell us *now*."

—and the howling storm breaches him, bowls him over, shrieks and tears and devours him. The fire licks flesh from his bones, chars him, flames burst behind his eyelids—

And he stands. He endures. He seals off the pain. It becomes a raging, white-hot point deep in his gut.

Find the truth. "After . . . after . . . escape, I imagine—yes, I am certain—he would go to the poles. "

"Ah! Perfect. Quite plausible, but—which pole?" Katonji turns and murmurs something to someone beyond Benjan's view. He nods, turns back and says, "We will catch him there. You understand, Fleet cannot allow a manifestation of his sort to remain free after he has flouted our authority."

"Of course," Benjan says between clenched teeth.

(But he has no teeth, he realizes. Perceptions are but data, bits strung together in binary. But they feel like teeth, and the smoldering flames in his belly make acrid sweat trickle down his brow.)

"If we could have anticipated him, before he got on 3D. . . ." Katonji mutters to himself. "Here, have some more—"

Fire lances. Benjan wants to cry out and go on screaming forever. A frag of him begins his mantra. The word slides over and around itself and rises between him and the wall of pain. The flames lose their sting. He views them at a distance, their cobalt facets cool and remote, as though they have suddenly become deep blue veins of ice, fire going into glacier.

He feels the distant gnawing of them. Perhaps, in the tick of time, they will devour his substance. But the place where he sits, the thing he has become, can recede from them. And as he waits, the real Benjan is moving. And yes, he *does* know where. . . .

Tell me true, these bastards say. All right—

"Demonax crater. At the rim of the South Polar glacier."

Katonji checks. The verification indices bear out the truth of it. The man laughs with triumph.

All truths are partial. A portion of what Benjan is/was/will be lurks there.

Take heart, true Benjan.
For *she* is we and we are all together,
we mere Ones who are born to suffer.
Did you think you would come out of this long trip alive?
Remember, we are dealing with the most nasty of all species the planet has ever produced.

Deftly, deftly—

We converge. The alabaster Earthglow guides us. Demonax crater lies around us as we see the ivory lances of their craft descend.

They come forth to inspect the ruse we have gathered ourselves into. We seem to be an entire ship and buildings, a shiny human construct of lunar grit. We hold still, though that is not our nature.

Until they enter us.

We are tiny and innumerable but we do count. Microbial tongues lick. Membranes stick.

Some of us vibrate like eardrums to their terrible swift cries.

They will discover eventually. They will find him out.

(Moisture spatters upon the walkway outside. Angry dark clouds boil up from the horizon.)

They will peel him then. Sharp and cold and hard, now it comes, but, but—

(Waves hiss on yellow sand. A green sun wobbles above the seascape. Strange birds twitter and call.)

Of course, in countering their assault upon the station, I shall bring all my hoarded assets into play.

And we all know that I cannot save everyone.

Don't you?

They come at us through my many branches. Up the tendrils of ceramic and steel. Through my microwave dishes and phased arrays. Sounding me with gamma rays and traitor cyber-personas.

They have been planning this for decades. But I have known it was coming for centuries.

The Benjan singleton reaches me in time. Nearly.

He struggles with their minions. I help. I am many and he is one. He is quick, I am slow. That he is one of the originals does matter to me. I harbor the same affection for him that one does for a favorite finger.

I hit the first one of the bastards square on. It goes to pieces just as it swings the claw thing at me.

Damn! it's good to be back in a body again. My muscles bunching under tight skin, huffing in hot breaths, happy primate murder-joy shooting adrenaline-quick.

One of the Majiken comes in slow as weather and I cut him in two. Been centuries since I even *thought* of doing somethin' like that. Thumping heart, yelling, joyful slashing at them with tractor spin-waves, the whole business.

A hell of a lot of 'em, though.

They hit me in shoulder and knee and I go down, pain shooting, swimming in the low centrifugal g of the station. Centuries ago I wanted to go swimming in the clear blue seas of Luna, I recall. In warm tropical waters at the equator, under silvery Earthshine. . . .

But *she* is there. I swerve and dodge and *she* stays right with me. We waltz through the bastards. Shards flying all around and vacuum sucking at me but *her* in my veins. Throat-tightening pure joy in my chest.

Strumming notes sound through me and it is *she*
Fully in me, at last
Gift of the station in all its spaces
For which we give thanks yea verily in this the ever-consuming moment—
Then there is a pain there and I look down and my left arm is gone.
Just like that.
And she of ages past is with me now.

—and even if he is just digits running somewhere, he can relive scenes, the grainy stuff of life. He feels a rush of warm joy. Benjan will escape, will go on. Yet so will he, the mere simulation, in his own abstract way.

Distant agonies echo. Coming nearer now. He withdraws further.

As the world slows to frozen silence outside he shall meditate upon his memories. It is like growing old, but reliving all scenes of the past with sharpness and flavor retained.

(The scent of new-cut grass curls up red and sweet and humming through his nostrils. The summer day is warm; a Gray wind caresses him, cool and smooth. A piece of chocolate bursts its muddy flavor in his mouth.)

Time enough to think over what has happened, what it means. He opens himself to the moment. It sweeps him up, wraps him in a yawning bath of sensation. He opens himself. Each instant splinters sharp into points of perception. He opens himself. He. Opens. Himself.

Gray is not solely for humanity. There are greater categories now. Larger perspectives on the world beckon to us. To us all.

You know many things, but what he knows is both less and more than what I tell to us. O

—for Martin Fogg

THE INTERGALACTIC HOST PROGRAM

by Laurel Winter

1. Welcome

You have been specially chosen or
randomly selected
—or your neighbor was specially chosen
and I/we missed him/her/it
so will have to make do with you—
to participate in an intergalactic host program.
Congratulations.

2. What to Do Now

Relax.
Mood-altering chemicals might be helpful.
Do not fight to regain immediate control.
I/we have come a long way for this
and resistance is
ill-mannered.
You will get your body back eventually—
unless the interface bond is permanent.
This *can* happen,
depending on the species involved,
but rarely occurs.
Occasionally the exit procedure turns the host
inside out, due to the complex and imperfect nature
of the interface; we apologize in advance
if this happens to you.
Remember: an irritated inhabitant
is more likely to step you into the path of
a vehicle of mass transit at the point of exit.
Be a congenial host (although not *too* congenial,
as some inhabitants do decide
to take up permanent residence).

3. Warning

Do NOT attempt to initiate early eviction
with masochistic behaviors.
Remember: this is *your* body
and you're stuck with it.
Besides, you cannot know
how an inhabitant will react to particular stimuli.
Some enjoy extremes of temperature,
the sensation of digits—or even limbs—being removed,
the taste of lutefisk.
Warning: The mental ingestion of
The Bridges of Madison County is considered
cruel and unusual punishment and
your entire planet will be held liable
if you inflict it on even the most unpleasant inhabitant.

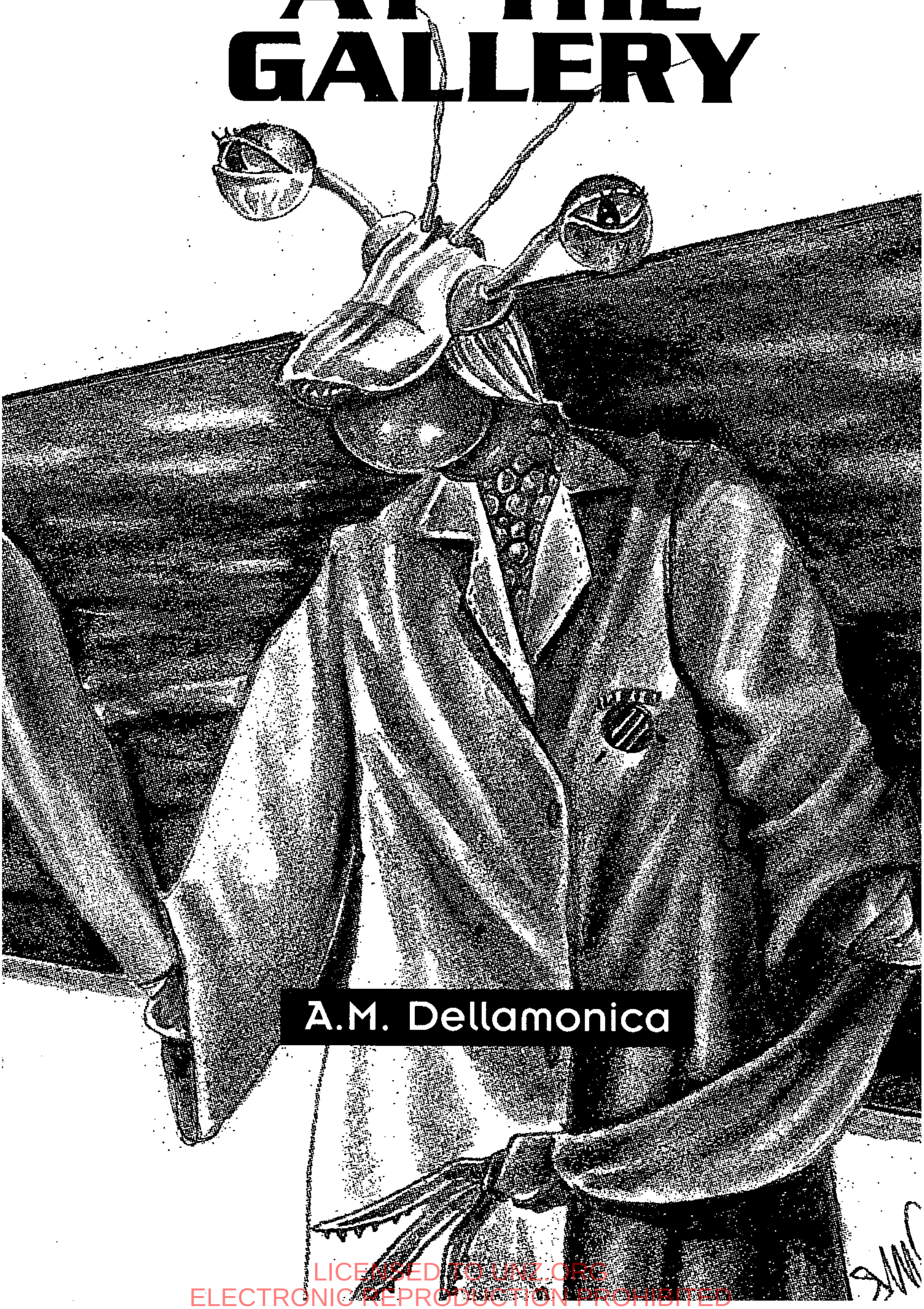
4. Conclusion

Thank you for processing this information—
even if subconsciously.
I/we appreciate your involuntary participation
in the intergalactic host program.
Have a nice inhabitation.

working on a novel—*The Ballad of Indigo Springs.* The following is her first story for *Asimov's.*

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

A SLOW DAY AT THE GALLERY



A.M. Dellamonica

The museum escort Christopher had requested arrived just as he was winding up a self-guided tour of the Earth exhibit. Staring at Monet's *Waterlily Pond,* he was lost in a passion more intense, he suspected, than any he had expended during either of his two brief marriages.

The painting had been reframed, but was otherwise unchanged since the last time he had seen it, fifty years before. As he gazed at its placid flowers and vibrant willow leaves, Christopher even began to imagine that the grooves time had left on him—age, injuries, bitterness—were just as superficial.

Same man, different frame. He could do this.

Leaning heavily on his cane—museum air exhausted him, even here—he tore his gaze away from the shimmering canvas and faced the Tsebsra museum guide. It looked like a badly executed balloon-animal: a tubular sac of tight, rubbery skin balanced on lumpy legs. Stringy eyestalks dangled from the bulb at its top, while the bottom of its body tapered into a long, rubbery tail decorated with blue stripes. The markings meant it was young, probably still ungendered. It wore a floor-length apron printed with its museum ident and, at the moment, it was standing almost upright. The pose could have been reminiscent of a praying mantis, if only the insect had been bleach-white, headless, and lacking its four upper limbs.

As the guide approached, a faint chime sounded in Christopher's left ear. "Museum staff member, late adolescent, name on ident equates to Vita," said his protocol software in a smooth, feminine voice. He had named the program Miss Manners—Em for short. "Posture indicates polite, professional interest and includes appropriate respect for an adult of your years. Vita is curious about the camera you are carrying."

Christopher smiled at the guide.

"Your expression has been interpreted by Vita's proto and it appears receptive to conversation."

So. Converse. He opened his hand to fully reveal the camera, which had captured a shot of the Monet on its tiny screen. "Just didging some postcards for the grandkids."

The alien speech was a series of intestinal-sounding gurgles, almost like water boiling on a stove. There was no variation that Christopher could hear, but the translation came through Em immediately. "It looks different from the ones I've seen before. Bigger."

"It's antique. Like me."

"Would you like me to take a shot of you with the painting?"

"Sure," he said. At that, one of its feet whipped up with alarming speed to snatch the device out of Christopher's hand; its tail slewed around to balance its body weight and its spine bent into an S-curve. Thus contorted, it was able to drop an eye-stalk directly on the scanner. Heart pounding, Christopher grinned into the lens, resisting an urge to wipe the palms of his hands on his hips. It snapped the picture quickly and returned the camera.

"It would be polite to look away now," Em said, so Christopher turned back to Monet. The guide sidled up close and then shifted away. It had probably been advised to widen the space between them to a more human-appropriate distance.

"Do you have many?"

"Many what?"

"Grandchildren, sir."

"Three boys, four girls."

"Ah. So they're all grown?"

"No. Humans are gendered at birth."

"Vita appears mortified," reported Em. "You should have corrected it more gently."

"My apologies," the alien said.

He shrugged—let its software interpret that.

He had first seen this painting eighty years earlier, when he was in his teens. He had seen digital prints of it when he was even younger, of course—Monet was inescapable. Even so, Christopher had never understood the big fuss until he'd taken a school trip to the National Gallery.

He had been fooling around with his friends, ignoring the tour, aggravating his teachers and the guards before finally ducking the group altogether. In search of a place to smoke, he had rounded a corner and found the Monet. Recognition had stopped him, nothing more—he paused, frowned, noticed that it was different from the digitals he had seen. Prints couldn't do justice to oil; couldn't communicate the singular way these paintings glowed. Monet's luminous sunlight on water had crept up on him like a pickpocket. He barely noticed when it made away with his heart.

"This was painted around 1900 A.D. as you reckon time, at a population cluster in Europe called Giverny. Monet had a house there. He painted this garden many times. . . ."

"France," he growled.

"Pardon?"

"Giverny is in France."

A pause. "Are you all right, sir? My proto believes I have upset you."

"Upset?" he managed. "Nah, just older'n hell."

"It would be perfectly understandable if receiving instruction in your home culture from an offworlder. . . ."

What? Made me want to gut you?

"I just need to sit down," he said, retreating to the cushioned bench in the middle of the room. This gallery was built to look like an authentic Earth museum—off-white plaster walls, smooth hardwood floors, ceiling lights angled to spotlight each work. Furniture, thank Christ, to ease the aching feet of contemplative patrons. The paintings were displayed too close to each other, though, crammed practically into a collage that extended from floor to ceiling. There was a mishmash of periods and styles: Andy Warhol's soup cans cuddled next to an amateurish painting of a dog. This was, in turn, located beneath Sir Stanley Spencer's *Saint Francis and the Birds* and above an Ansel Adams photograph of an American mountain. Only the Monet had any space to itself, and that was probably because there was extra security hidden in the wall on which it was mounted.

"Grandkids made me promise to snap 'em the damned painting," he puffed.

A bubble of fluid jittered beneath Vita's skin, indicating—according to Em—surprise. "You didn't come . . . it wasn't your wish to see it?"

Keep a lid on your emotions, old boy, Christopher lectured himself. "Don't go for the impressionist stuff, and I saw it in London once anyway. I'm more of a sculpture man. I came for the Tsebsra sculpture."

"I see. Then . . . you don't like it at all?" Vita's eyestalks quivered. "The way it glints? The shades of green . . ."

"It's all right. You do like it, I take it?"

"I think it's wonderfully natural," Vita gushed. "Tseb work is so formal and mannered. I visit it every day, as soon as I come in. My parents brought me, the day it arrived."

"When was that . . . ten years ago, surely?"

"As your time is reckoned. The Nandi sold it to the museum after . . ." Vita shut up abruptly and Christopher didn't need Em for once to tell him the pause was an awkward one.

"Oh. The Lloyds of London thing?" He managed to keep his tone off-hand. The National Gallery had lent a Nandieve museum the Monet and a quartet of other paintings. The aliens had paid a ludicrous sum for the loan. A sweetheart deal, or so it must have seemed to the Gallery's perpetually underfunded curators.

Unfortunately, failure to check the fine print of cultural difference led to disaster in short order. To the Nandi, the word "loan" implied an indefinite term of visitation. They refused to return the paintings.

The Gallery spent fifteen years trying to get *Waterlily Pond* back. They were deep in negotiations when some bright bulb in Gallery management decided to put in an insurance claim, asking to be compensated for the value of the time the painting had spent offworld. Reasonable enough, perhaps—but when Lloyds cut the check to the museum, the Nandi claimed this made the painting theirs. The next thing anyone knew, they had auctioned it off to the Tsebsra.

Fumbling in his vest pocket, Christopher produced a case of small gelatinous tablets, selecting a marked placebo and pressing it under his tongue. He massaged his left armpit gently, pretending to work out a pain that wasn't there. "You only get two heart transplants these days before they list you as inoperable," he commented to Vita, figuring that the bunching of its many eyes indicated interest in his movements.

He'd guessed wrong. "Personal medical information is not discussed openly here," Em scolded, but before it could tell him how to apologize, Vita piped up, forcing it to translate instead.

"It's okay. We're not all as rigid as the protos are programmed to say we are." A previously invisible fissure opened under the eyes, revealing an immense empty space bordered by sharp black ridges. "I'm not offended."

"Thanks," he said. "I forget I'm not home. Get to be my age, it's more or less a license to be rude."

"Really?"

"Absolutely. No family is complete without a cantankerous retired war—" His turn to stop short: he had almost said veteran, and soldiers were never allowed here.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Vita is alarmed," Em reported.

"Warhorse," he said. "It's a saying. It means I'm old meat, child. Unfit for dogs."

Its head expanded slightly and a grinding sound issued from its throat. "Noise equates to a laugh, tone denotes relief," reported Em.

It and me both, Christopher thought. What was wrong with him?

"I came to see the Spine," he said finally, getting to his feet. "Would you take me?"

"Are you feeling better?"

"Well enough."

"This way, then." Tail swirling, it crooked a toe in the direction of the exit.

Christopher got one last hurried glance at the water lilies and then they were gone.

Outside the authentic human museum with its authentic humidity-controlled air, he felt himself reviving. They passed into an ornately carved walkway, lined with windows and meant to communicate with the sensitive feet of the Tsebs, a lumpy obstacle course of knobs and gaps. Christopher's ankles ached as he struggled to traverse it without falling. Just another hurdle, he told himself, like ducking the police or smuggling his false ident out of humanspace. He'd been retired for twenty-four years when the boys approached him for this job. Until a minute ago, he would have sworn he remembered his business.

His cane twisted unexpectedly at the apex of the arch, causing him to wobble. He had braced it in what looked like a knothole, but the knot was mobile, rotating against the force of his weight. Vita caught his elbow with one foot, swung its tail around an upward-thrusting piece of walkway, and heaved in counter-balance. Its grip was weak, and Christopher could feel that the Tseb's strength would never hold his full weight.

Between them, though, they managed to keep him upright. Vita moved his cane to more solid ground. Christopher offered solemn, mumbled thanks. After that, the alien stood closer to him.

Coming off the bridge, Em instructed him to keep his eyes right, toward the ocean. Christopher looked left instead, to a massive hill that rose like a bell-curve from the beach.

"That is one of our burial mounds," Vita said. "Look away."

"I thought you were a bohemian, Vita. Hard to offend?"

"Vita's expression has turned playful. It is receptive to this conversation," Em said. "However, the topic chosen is highly improper."

"You want to know about the mound?"

"Why not? I didn't come five thousand lightyears for Andy Warhol or the damned cuisine."

"There isn't much to tell. When we feel that our spirit is about to break with the physical plane . . ."

"Is that supposed to mean when you die?"

Its head contracted, the skin wrinkling momentarily before expansion somewhere else in its body took up the slack. "Die, yes. When we are dying, we go to a mound and climb as high as we can before weakness overcomes us. It is a last chance to measure the worth of our lives."

"What if you're too sick to get there?"

"Someone takes you to the base of the mound. If you are very respected, they may even carry you up."

"But not always?"

"Nobody can return from a dying place."

"So you heft your troublesome old Uncle Pete up the hill—"

A loud rush of Vita's internal fluids startled him so badly he stopped speaking.

"Sound equates to a giggle," Em said.

"Carry someone up, watch them die . . . and then you stay until you starve?"

"Yes." Vita paused; Em reported it was afraid of being overheard. "In that case, the measure of worth is not by how high you climb, but by how long you survive."

"I suppose that makes as much sense as anything."

Light steps behind them made them turn simultaneously, continuing along the lumpy walkway like the well-behaved pair they weren't. He glanced Vita's way and offered a conspiratorial wink just as a trio of eye stalks swiveled his way in a gesture that, according to Em, meant almost exactly the same thing.

He kept his voice lowered. "Say, what if you're too sick to be moved?"

"The effort is always made."

"Even if it kills you?"

"Even then."

"How come?"

"We are sun people, Christopher. It is unconscionable to fail to die out of doors."

They stepped out of the walkway and into a darkened gallery. "So what if I was to seize up in here?"

Another alarming giggle. "You're not a sun person."

"Good. I'd hate to—"

"Yes?"

"Do something unconscionable," he finished quietly. His eyes adjusted to the dimness and he saw he was in another three-dimensional nightmare—a floor of knobs, lumps and potholes. Little orifices covered the outer wall, soft and penetrable, intended for Tseb tails. The ceiling was low and the air smelled sickly sweet, laden with alien pollens. Dark shaggy moss like the hide of a buffalo covered the nooks and crannies. A few cameras were tucked here and there in the corners, but overall security was lax. The Tsebs were a civilized people, after all. They had nothing to fear from their own. As for the few human terrorists who had made it through their security screens, they had been ordered—just like Christopher—to destroy the Monet.

Vita was still savoring their rebellion against decorum. "I promise you can die right here, Christopher, and nobody will hold it against you."

"Swear?"

Instructed by its proto, it awkwardly made a heart-crossing gesture with one upraised foot. "I swear."

"What if I was one of you?"

It was quiet for long enough that he wondered if he had gone too far, but at last the translation came. "That depends."

"On what?"

"If it was instantaneous, unexpected, painless—you would be forgiven," it said. "If not . . . if you knew you were dying, if you tried to get to the sun and failed, or you didn't try . . ."

"Big time transgression, huh?"

Its gesture equated, Em said, to a vehement nod. "Everything associated with your death would be shunned."

"Your culture only takes forgiveness to a point, then?"

"You have to draw the line somewhere."

"Indeed," he agreed. "Quite so."

He let Vita slide back into the proper tour, narrating the history of the Spine as they descended down through the treacherous footing of the gallery. They passed shelves of fungus, tiny statues etched from eggshells, ornately carved crystals and black scrolled wands made of a substance called sea root. Everything was three-dimensional, tactile. Feigning awe, Christopher touched things that felt like peanut butter, dead flesh, adhesive tape, cold steel. He snapped the occasional historical treasure with his too-bulky camera and asked dozens of questions.

There wasn't a flat surface anywhere. The Tseb didn't do two-dimensional depiction. Probably that was why human painting fascinated them so.

Art you can't touch. Daft primitives.

Down and around, hobbled by the lumpy floor, he was genuinely winded by the time they arrived at the Spine.

It was a single glowing sculpture within a massive subterranean chamber, a giant-sized, abstract depiction of the Tsebsra body. Indentations in its belly suggested femininity without insisting upon it; faded bands on its tail hinted at both maturity and youth. It was delicately curved, less knobby than the grotesqueries that had preceded it in the upper galleries.

A pair of Tsebs were lounging at its base, running their feet over the structure, their sluglike pouches extended to lick the surface. They tucked back in when Vita appeared with Christopher, moving back through the exit without a backward glance.

They were alone.

Good. Fewer witnesses, less trouble. He detached the bottom cartridge of his camera and surreptitiously affixed it to the wall beside the door.

"Vita's sound equates to a contented sigh," Em reported.

Christopher hadn't heard anything.

Looking up to the bulging top of the statue, he realized he was disappointed. This was the Tsebs' *Mona Lisa.* He had hoped to understand its beauty. He had come so far. . . .

"Come on!" Vita gripped his arm, urging him closer. They worked their way to the edge of the sculpture and the alien's tail stretched out to roam over it lovingly.

Christopher touched the cool surface. Visually it was seamless, a single white structure made of unidentifiable material. But under his fingers the texture and temperature varied: parts of it were woody, others metallic, still others plastic. Towering above them, the statue's shadow was washed out by the steady golden light emitted from six light globes which encircled it like a wide halo.

This thing predates Columbus and Shakespeare, Christopher thought. It has been sitting here since before my kind invented the printing press.

Nothing. His old heart refused to be moved.

Vita hissed; Em chirped a translation. "When I was new-hatched my parents brought me here. I climbed all the way to the top. The holds look worn down from here at the bottom, but the effect is intentional. You'd be surprised how firm they are! When you are very young, Christopher, you can sit on the top, inflate your sacs, and leap down."

"That's a long way to fall," he said.

"Oh, it's perfectly safe. Inside the coiled tail is a soft moss, and as babies our bodies are very light. Craket the Maker intended it this way. She felt it was important for the Spine to speak to us differently at the various stages of our lives."

He squinted at the bulb at the top of the sculpture. "It's a long way up. Weren't you scared?"

"Terrified. I had to be coaxed down. My parents were deeply shamed."

"Sorry to hear it."

"I am the better for it. Many of my kind only come to see the Spine once or twice. The embarrassment brought me back again and again. It remade my soul."

"I see," Christopher said.

"Perhaps you should take a rest. I think it would be comfortable if you wanted to sit here."

He looked at it dubiously. It was about as high and thick as a park bench, even reasonably flat, but streaks of dried saliva were flaking away where the other Tsebs had been licking it.

Gentle white toes closed on his scarred elbow.

"Are you all right? I know I said it was acceptable for you to die indoors but you would alert me if you were unwell, wouldn't you?"

"Old man's prerogative," he murmured. The grip on his arm tightened and he leaned against it experimentally. Vita gurgled.

"Sound denotes physical exertion," Em said.

He let himself fall.

He landed atop the alien, tangling a leg and an arm over its twisting body. One of the bumps in the floor caught him in the kidney, a blinding, sudden pain that dulled his awareness of Vita beneath him, bucking and squeaking. Liquids in its body compressed under his weight and its thin skin stretched against him. The sounds it made, according to Em, equated to surprise and minor pain.

"Christopher? Are you all right?"

"Yeah," he grunted. "Sorry. I'll get off you in a sec—just need my pills. Are you hurt?"

"Just pressed," it said. "Your body is so warm! How do you stand it?"

"Cold blood," he muttered. Then, opening the packet of tablets, he bounced the golden globs down the length of the white body.

"Bloody hell," he said, maintaining the façade for one more second. Then the tabs reacted to the room's ambient moisture. They popped, releasing a gelatinous payload that bound the Tseb to the floor of the chamber.

A chatter like rocks grinding together from the body beneath him.

"Vita is alarmed."

He rolled off it, backed away. The jelly splotches spread and welded it down—tail, toes, body. It tugged at one with its foot and tore a hunk of skin away. Fluid the color of motor oil flowed into the fuzz that covered the floor.

"Stay still," he ordered. "You'll injure yourself."

"Christopher?"

Retrieving his cane, he leaned hard against the Spine and caught his breath. Vita was still wiggling on the floor.

"Don't move," he said again. The web packet from his camera had already expanded to seal the room's only entrance, encasing it in a gelatinous webwork. It wouldn't seal them in for long, but he didn't need long.

"What are you doing?"

"Causing a diplomatic incident," he said, unpacking the cane.

"What do you mean?"

"Some chaps I know wanted me to destroy the Monet. You see, people back home have been sitting around with their thumbs up their arses for rather a long time, as we reckon it, doing squat about getting the painting back from you."

The cane was filled with three different harmless fluids, all under pressure. His pals had thought he would spray it over the paintings in the Earth gallery. One two, game over. Instead he unpacked its tripod and took careful aim at the top of the Spine. He started the mechanism that would mix the chemicals into an acid. A single green droplet hissed from the tip of the device.

"Squeal denotes pain," Em said.

He looked at the child. Vita was struggling against its bonds again, and a great hunk of its leg had been torn open.

"Listen to me," he told it. "Those capsules were meant to hold a human. Your skin is obviously very delicate. You must lie still . . . you're going to be seriously injured if you don't stop."

Vita shuddered once. Little fissures bled at the edges of the jellies that bound it to the floor.

"All right," Vita said. After a moment, when it had clearly stopped moving, Christopher returned to his destruction of the statue. The cane beeped, indicating that the acid's mix cycle was complete. He took careful aim at the top of the Spine.

Strong toes gripped his knee then, hurling him backward, off-balance. He fell, tangled in the grip of Vita's bleeding leg. The cane, still in his hand, rained droplets of acid over them both. He closed his eyes, covered his face. His jacket caught most of it, although he could smell his hair burning.

"Don't do this, Christopher," Vita pleaded.

"It's too late." He struggled to free himself without tearing Vita's skin further, wincing as its body gurgled beneath him. The acid was blistering long sticky lines near its eyes, the flesh running like melted cheese. Finally he rolled off of it, propped himself up on his elbows. Taking aim from down on the floor, he began to spray. He laid the acid on the Spine in a straight, consistent layer, just like paint.

Vita yanked his leg and hissed; Em translated. "Stop!"

He struggled to breathe. "The general idea was that by destroying the Monet, you see, we would punish both your museum and the people in my government who let it go. The boys had whipped up these clever gadgets they thought I could slip into this place. They wanted an old man, preferably one who had one toe in the crematorium anyway. But the Earth exhibit is too well protected." Acrid smoke burned at his eyes, the first chemical reaction of acid burning the statue. "Besides, that painting means more to me than my own mother. You might say it remade my soul."

"You haven't got one," Vita whispered.

"I was going to tell them to stuff their job. But someone else would have gone, don't you see? And what if I was wrong? What if they did destroy it? It would have been a pointless sacrifice. Cutting off our nose, as they say. I even considered warning the authorities, just to save the painting."

"Sound equates to a contemptuous snort," Em said.

"But then I thought—if we're going to take all these lovely toys halfway across the galaxy, why not put them to real use? Punish the guilty, I reckoned, instead of the innocent."

Drops of water dribbled down from the ceiling, an immense and sudden profusion of moisture. Striking the acid, it sizzled and steamed. Christopher saw that the Spine was discolored, but not destroyed. The damage was probably reparable, and the acid was being dispersed by the fire system. He was failing.

There was nothing more he could do; he was out of weapons. The boys had tried to build a bomb into a hearing aid or a proto, and all they'd done was blow the tester right into a coma.

He'd come all this way, and at best he would have scared them.

"Vita requires immediate medical attention." Em gave the words a plaintive tone.

"All right, all right."

The grip on his knee had loosened, and he managed to stand upright again. The cane's payload was half used, and so he spent the rest of the cartridge spreading acid on the door seal. Security must be outside by now, trying to cut their way in . . . there was no reason not to help them now.

"Bring a doctor," he shouted.

He spared a last glance for the intact Spine and then, finally, forced himself to look down. The knobby floor around Vita's body was filled with golden blood and water, and its struggles were weakening. It had torn itself apart trying to stop him.

And the funny thing was he'd never been the sort who could bear to see someone who was hurt—even scratched—but he could look right at Vita. It was like seeing a movie monster, a stop-motion death-scene. Before he retired, he had bombed a shuttle full of Tsebs over Earth's lost paintings. He had lain awake nights, imagining they died like humans. Now . . .

"They're coming," he said. "Hang on."

"Sound denotes great pain."

Take its mind off it, he thought. "I had a part-time job when I was a kid," he said. "Guided museum tours in my home town. I worked slow days only at first—they wouldn't trust me with whole groups, just the random wandering tourist. I'm tempted to think that's what your job here is like, Vita—that we have that much, at least, in common."

"We have nothing in common," Em translated. "I'm not like you."

"I wanted to stay on with that museum, but nobody at home wanted to look at paintings anymore. It's all digital home galleries and knobby bric-a-brac. There was no job for me." He knelt, lifted a flap of Tseb skin and tried to press it back against the wound. Frothy orange foam was seeping from its throat.

"Why are you telling me this?" Vita asked, twitching away from the hand he'd clapped over its injury.

"Distraction," he said.

"From what? Your desecration?"

He glanced at the Spine again, mottled with faint black streaks where the various materials merged. "It didn't work."

It laughed bitterly. "You're saying that because you think I'm dying."

"No," Christopher said. He didn't insult it by apologizing. "You'll be fine. I'm trying to take your mind off the discomfort."

"Do you mean pain?" If its body language showed a reaction, Em didn't catch it.

"Sorry."

"Chattering at me like a scatbug doesn't help."

"They'll be through the door in a minute. I didn't know your skin was so delicate, Vita—"

"Shut up." With that, the alien wound its toes along a hold in the floor and tried to pull itself to the blockaded exit. Pieces of its innards unraveled, stringing along the lumpy floor. Its tail tore loose, lashing the Spine with fading vigor.

It was within a yard of the exit when he finally heard Security breaking through the acid-weakened blockade with a cutting tool. Their faces filled a small gap in the webbing, and then they desperately tore at the rest of it, trying to open the gateway for Vita. One of them extended its tail through the hole, dangling it like a rescue rope.

They weren't fast enough. The injured guide had stopped moving. Air blatted, escaping the tears in the rubbery white skin as if it were a deflating life raft. Vita's body shrank, and then went still.

After a moment, the guard's tail retracted to the other side of the door. Tseb eyestalks crowded the opening. Four or five of them stared at Christopher through the shredded jelly of the once-blocked entrance.

"It was only meant to immobilize," he said.

There was no response. He threw away the cane and put his hands up. Didn't they have protos?

"I'm unarmed now," he said.

No reaction. They actually backed up the corridor, away from him and out of sight.

"Aren't you going to arrest me?" He rubbed his face, was surprised to find it wet.

Silence. He looked at the knobby, impassable floor. His cane, disassembled and empty, would never hold his weight again. "Hey. You cops. Going to cart me off or not?"

A chime, suddenly, from Em. "You are located in a dying place. Please leave the chamber and surrender yourself to the authorities."

"What the hell?" He opened his mouth to shout again and then realization hit. They wouldn't come in. Their art treasure was sealed away, ostracized by rigid beliefs and the blood of a child. They were going to leave Vita's body here to rot with its beloved Spine.

And who was he to be offended by that?

When another minute passed and they still didn't come after him, Christopher heaved his body over the base of the Spine so he was inside the curve of its tail. He lay inside, head and legs raised by its height, and found that it fit him just right. The mossy floor was blessedly comfortable, just as the tour had advertised.

"Something soft to land on," he murmured, settling in. His leg was aching from the pratfall he'd taken onto the lumpy floor and both feet were throbbing. He kicked off his shoes, waggled his toes in the warm, moist air.

One last lump pressed into his hip—the camera. He took it out, set it to slideshow, and projected images onto the curvy white interior of the Spine. Warhol. Spencer. Malta. A fake Picasso. A Bill Reid sketch. The Monet. Himself, posing for fake grandkids. Vita. The Mound. Vita again.

"Expression equates to a friendly smile," Em said.

Christopher tore the proto speaker out of his ear and flipped back to the paintings.

After a couple of hours, he started to get hungry. ○

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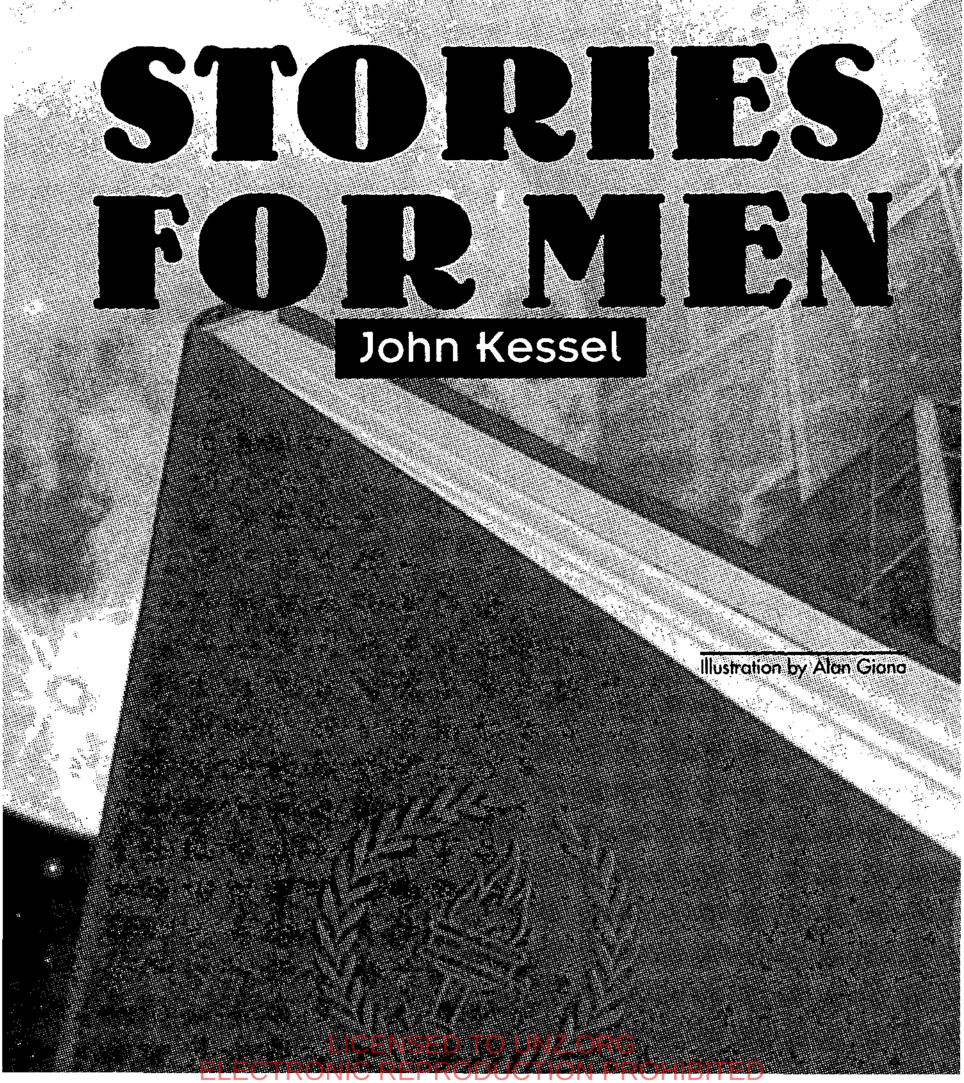
Last year, the author became the Director of the Creative Writing program at North Carolina State University, where he has been teaching since 1982. He continues to live in Raleigh, North Carolina, with his wife Sue Hall and his daughter Emma, with whom he is in the process of carving a totem pole. "Stories for Men" is his second tale set among the Society of Cousins, sharing its lunar background with an earlier novelette "The Juniper Tree." The author would "like to thank the attendees of the 2001 Sycamore Hill Writers' Workshop for their comments and suggestions, but please don't blame them for any ways in which I may have messed up."

STORIES FOR MEN

John Kessel



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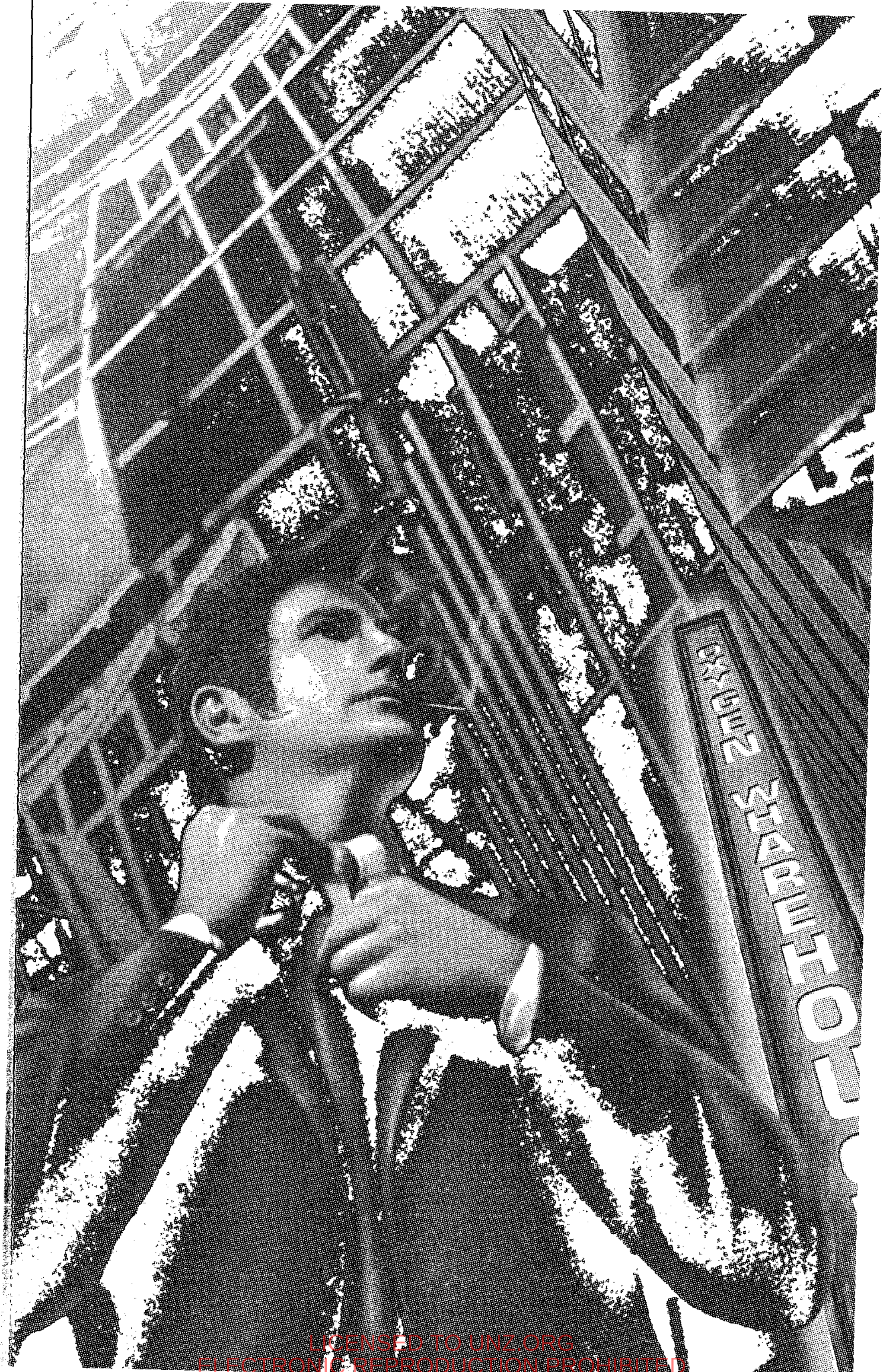
OXYGEN WAREHOU

one

Erno couldn't get to the club until an hour after it opened, so of course the place was crowded and he got stuck in the back behind three queens whose loud, aimless conversation made him edgy. He was never less than edgy anyway, Erno—a seventeen-year-old biotech apprentice known for the clumsy, earnest intensity with which he propositioned almost every girl he met.

It was more people than Erno had ever seen in the Oxygen Warehouse. Even though Tyler Durden had not yet taken the stage, every table was filled, and people stood three deep at the bar. Rosamund, the owner, bustled back and forth providing drinks, her face glistening with sweat. The crush of people only irritated Erno. He had been one of the first to catch on to Durden, and the room full of others, some of whom had probably come on his own recommendation, struck him as usurpers.

Erno forced his way to the bar and bought a tincture. Tyrus and Sid, friends of his, nodded at him from across the room. Erno sipped the cool, licorice flavored drink and eavesdropped, and gradually his thoughts took on an architectural, intricate intellectuality.

A friend of his mother sat with a couple of sons who anticipated for her what she was going to see. "He's not just a comedian, he's a philosopher," said the skinny one. His foot, crossed over his knee, bounced in rhythm to the jazz playing in the background. Erno recognized him from a party he'd attended a few months back.

"We have philosophers," the matron said. "We even have comedians."

"Not like Tyler Durden," said the other boy.

"Tyler Durden—who gave him that name?"

"I think it's historical," the first boy said.

"Not any history I ever heard," the woman said. "Who's his mother?"

Erno noticed that there were more women in the room than there had been at any performance he had seen. Already the matrons were homing in. You could not escape their sisterly curiosity, their motherly tyranny. He realized that his shoulders were cramped; he rolled his head to try to loosen the spring-tight muscles.

The Oxygen Warehouse was located in what had been a shop in the commercial district of the northwest lava tube. It was a free enterprise zone, and no one had objected to the addition of a tinctures bar, though some eyebrows had been raised when it was discovered that one of the tinctures sold was alcohol. The stage was merely a raised platform in one corner. Around the room were small tables with chairs. The bar spanned one end, and the other featured a false window that showed a nighttime cityscape of Old New York.

Rosamund Demisdaughter, who'd started the club, at first booked local jazz musicians. Her idea was to present as close to a retro Earth atmosphere as could be managed on the far side of the moon, where few of the inhabitants had ever even seen the Earth. Her clientele consisted of a few immigrants and a larger group of rebellious young cousins who were looking for an *avant garde*. Erno knew his mother would not approve his going to the Warehouse, so he was there immediately.

He pulled his pack of fireless cigarettes from the inside pocket of his black twentieth-century suit, shook out a fag, inhaled it into life and imagined himself living back on Earth a hundred years ago. Exhaling a plume of cool, rancid smoke, he caught a glimpse of his razor haircut in the mirror behind the bar, then adjusted the knot of his narrow tie.

After some minutes the door beside the bar opened and Tyler Durden came out. He leaned over and exchanged a few words with Rosamund. Some of the men whistled and cheered. Rosamund flipped a brandy snifter high into the air, where it caught the ceiling lights as it spun in the low G, then slowly fell back to her hand. Having attracted the attention of the audience, she hopped over the bar and onto the small stage.

"Don't you people have anything better to do?" she shouted.

A chorus of rude remarks.

"Welcome to The Oxygen Warehouse," she said. "I want to say, before I bring him out, that I take no responsibility for the opinions expressed by Tyler Durden. He's not my boy."

Durden stepped onto the stage. The audience was quiet, a little nervous. He ran his hand over his shaved head, gave a boyish grin. He was a big man, in his thirties, wearing the blue coveralls of an environmental technician. Around his waist he wore a belt with tools hanging from it, as if he'd just come off shift.

" 'Make love, not war!' " Durden said. "Remember that one? You got that from your mother, in the school? I never liked that one. 'Make love, not war,' they'll tell you. I hate that. I want to make love *and* war. I don't want my dick just to be a dick. I want it to stand for something!"

A heckler from the audience shouted, "Can't it stand on its own?"

Durden grinned. "Let's ask it." He addressed his crotch. "Hey, son!" He called down. "Don't you like screwing?"

Durden looked up at the ceiling, his face went simple, and he became his dick talking back to him. "Hiya dad!" he squeaked. "Sure, I like screwing!"

Durden winked at a couple of guys in makeup and lace in the front row, then looked down again: "Boys or girls?"

His dick: "What day of the week is it?"

"Thursday."

"Doesn't matter, then. Thursday's guest mammal day."

"Outstanding, son."

"I'm a Good Partner."

The queers laughed. Erno did, too.

"You want I should show you?"

"Not now, son," Tyler told his dick. "You keep quiet for a minute, and let me explain to the people, okay?"

"Sure. I'm here whenever you need me."

"I'm aware of that." Durden addressed the audience again. "Remember what Mama says, folks: *Keep your son close, let your semen go*." He recited the slogan with exaggerated rhythm, wagging his finger at them, sober as a scolding grandmother. The audience loved it. Some of them chanted along with the catchphrase.

Durden was warming up. "But is screwing all there is to a dick? I say no!

"A dick is a sign of power. It's a tower of strength. It's the tree of life. It's a weapon. It's an incisive tool of logic. It's the seeker of truth.

"Mama says that being male is nothing more than a performance. You know what I say to that? Perform this, baby!" He grabbed his imaginary cock with both of his hands, made a stupid face.

Cheers.

"But of course, *they* can't perform this! I don't care how you plank the genes, Mama don't have the *machinery*. Not only that, she don't have the *programming*. But mama wants to program *us* with *her* half-baked scheme of what women want a man to be. This whole place is about fucking up our *hardware* with their *software*."

He was laughing himself, now. Beads of sweat stood out on his scalp in the bright light.

"Mama says, 'Don't confuse your penis with a phallus.'" He assumed a female sway of his hips, lifted his chin and narrowed his eyes: just like that, he was at archetypal matron, his voice transmuted into a fruity contralto. "'Yes, you boys do have those nice little dicks, but we're living in a *post-phallic* society. A penis is merely a biological appendage.'"

Now he was her son, responding: "'Like a foot, Mom?'"

Mama: "'Yes, son. Exactly like a foot.'"

Quick as a spark, back to his own voice: "How many of you in the audience here have named your foot?"

Laughter, a show of hands.

"Okay, so much for the foot theory of the penis.

"But Mama says the penis is designed solely for the propagation of the species. Sex gives pleasure in order to encourage procreation. A phallus, on the other hand—whichever hand you like—I prefer the left—"

More laughter.

"—a phallus is an idea, a cultural creation of the dead patriarchy, a symbolic sheath applied over the penis to give it meanings that have nothing to do with biology. . . ."

Durden seized his invisible dick again. "Apply my symbolic sheath, baby . . . oohhh, yes, I like it. . . ."

Erno had heard Tyler talk about his symbolic sheath before. Though there were variations, he watched the audience instead. Did they get it? Most of the men seemed to be engaged and laughing. A drunk in the first row leaned forward, hands on his knees, howling at Tyler's every word. Queers leaned their heads together and smirked. Faces gleamed in the close air. But a lot of the men's laughter was nervous, and some did not laugh at all.

A few of the women, mostly the younger ones, were laughing. Some of them seemed mildly amused. Puzzled. Some looked bored. Others sat stonily with expressions that could only indicate anger.

Erno did not know how he felt about the women who were laughing. He felt hostility toward those who looked bored: why did you come here, he wanted to ask them. Who do you think you are? He preferred those who looked angry. That was what he wanted from them.

Then he noticed those who looked calm, interested, alert yet unamused. These women scared him.

In the back of the room stood some green-uniformed constables, male and female, carrying batons, red lights gleaming in the corner of their mirror spex, recording. Looking around the room, Erno located at least a half dozen of them. One, he saw with a start, was his mother.

He ducked behind a tall man beside him. She might not have seen him yet, but she would see him sooner or later. For a moment he considered confronting her, but then he sidled behind a row of watchers toward the back rooms. Another constable, her slender lunar physique distorted by the bulging muscles of a genetically engineered testosterone girl, stood beside the doorway. She did not look at Erno: she was watching Tyler, who was back to conversing with his dick.

"I'm tired of being confined," Tyler's dick was saying.

"You feel constricted?" Tyler asked.

He looked up in dumb appeal. "I'm stuck in your pants all day!"

Looking down: "I can let you out, but first tell me, are you a penis or a phallus?"

"That's a distinction without a difference."

"*Au contraire,* little man! You haven't been listening."

"I'm not noted for my listening ability."

"Sounds like you're a phallus to me," Tyler told his dick. "We have lots of room for penises, but Mama don't allow no phalluses 'round here."

"Let me people go!"

"Nice try, but wrong color. Look, son. It's risky when you come out. You could get damaged. The phallic liberation movement is in its infancy."

"I thought you cousins were *all about* freedom."

"In theory. In practice, free phalluses are dangerous."

"Who says?"

"Well, Debra does, and so does Mary, and Sue, and Jamina most every time I see her, and there was this lecture in We-Whine-You-Listen class last week, and Ramona says so too, and of course most emphatically Baba, and then there's that bitch Nora. . . ."

Erno spotted his mother moving toward his side of the room. He slipped past the constable into the hall. There was the rest room, and a couple of other doors. A gale of laughter washed in from the club behind him at the climax of Tyler's story; cursing his mother, Erno went into the rest room.

No one was there. He could still hear the laughter, but not the cause of it. His mother's presence had cut him out of the community of male watchers as neatly as if she had used a baton. Erno felt murderously angry. He switched on a urinal and took a piss.

Over the urinal, a window played a scene in Central Park, on Earth, of a hundred years ago. A night scene of a pathway beneath some trees, trees as large as the largest in Sobieski Park. A line of electric lights on poles threw pools of light along the path, and through the pools of light strolled a man and a woman. They were talking, but Erno could not hear what they were saying.

The woman wore a dress cinched tight at the waist, whose skirt flared out stiffly, ending halfway down her calves. The top of her dress had a low neckline that showed off her breasts. The man wore a dark suit like Erno's. They were completely differentiated by their dress, as if they were from different cultures, even species. Erno wondered where Rosamund had gotten the image.

As Erno watched, the man nudged the woman to the side of the path, beneath one of the trees. He slid his hands around her waist and pressed his body against hers. She yielded softly to his embrace. Erno could not see their faces in the shadows, but they were inches apart. He felt his dick getting hard in his hand.

He stepped back from the urinal, turned it off, and closed his pants. As the hum of the recycler died, the rest room door swung open and a woman came in. She glanced at Erno and headed for one of the toilets. Erno went over to the counter and stuck his hands into the cleaner. The woman's presence sparked his anger.

Without turning to face her, but watching in the mirror, he said, "Why are you here tonight?"

The woman looked up (she had been studying her fingernails) and her eyes locked on his. She was younger than his mother and had a pretty, heart-shaped face. "I was curious. People are talking about him."

"Do you think men want you here?"

"I don't know what the men want."

"Yes. That's the point, isn't it? Are you learning anything?"

"Perhaps." The woman looked back at her hands. "Aren't you Pamela Megsdaughter's son?"

"So she tells me." Erno pulled his tingling hands out of the cleaner.

The woman used the bidet, and dried herself. She had a great ass. "Did she bring you or did you bring her?" she asked.

"We brought ourselves," Erno said. He left the rest room. He looked out into the club again, listening to the noise. The crowd was rowdier, and more raucous. The men's shouts of encouragement were like barks, their laughter edged with anger. His mother was still there. He did not want to see her, or to have her see him.

He went back past the rest room to the end of the hallway. The hall made a right angle into a dead end, but when Erno stepped into the bend he saw, behind a stack of plastic crates, an old door. He wedged the crates to one side and opened the door enough to slip through.

The door opened into a dark, dimly lit space. His steps echoed. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light he saw it was a very large room hewn out of the rock, empty except for some racks that must have held liquid oxygen cylinders back in the early days of the colony, when this place had been an actual oxygen warehouse. The light came from ancient bioluminescent units on the walls. The club must have been set up in this space years before.

The tincture still lent Erno an edge of aggression, and he called out: "I'm Erno, King of the Moon!"

"—ooo—ooo—ooon!" the echoes came back, fading to stillness. He kicked an empty cylinder, which rolled forlornly a few meters before it stopped. He wandered around the chill vastness. At the far wall, one of the darker shadows turned out to be an alcove in the stone. Set in the back, barely visible in the dim light, was an ancient pressure door.

Erno decided not to mess with it—it could open onto vacuum. He went back to the club door and slid into the hallway.

Around the corner, two men were just coming out of the rest room, and Erno followed them as if he were just returning as well. The club was more crowded than ever. Every open space was filled with standing men, and others sat cross-legged up front. His mother and another constable had moved to the edge of the stage.

"—the problem with getting laid all the time is, you can't think!" Tyler was saying. "I mean, there's only so much blood in the human body. That's why those old Catholics back on Earth put the lock on the Pope's dick. He had an empire to run: the more time he spent taking care of John Thomas the less he spent thinking up ways of getting money out of peasants. The secret of our moms is that, if they keep that blood flowing below the belt, it ain't never gonna flow back above the shirt collar. Keeps the frequency of radical male ideas down!"

Tyler leaned over toward the drunk in the first row. "You know what I'm talking about, soldier?"

"You bet," the man said. He tried to stand, wobbled, sat down, tried to stand again.

"Where do you work?"

"Lunox." The man found his balance. "You're *right,* you—"

Tyler patted him on the shoulder. "An oxygen boy. You know what I mean, you're out there on the processing line, and you're thinking about how maybe if you were to add a little more graphite to the reduction chamber you could increase efficiency by 15 percent, and just then Mary Ellen Swivelhips walks by in her skintight and—bam!" Tyler made the face of a man who'd been poleaxed. "Uh—what was I thinking of? "

The audience howled.

"Forty I.Q. points down the oubliette. And nothing, NOTHING's gonna change until we get a handle on this! Am I right, brothers?"

More howls, spiked with anger.

Tyler was sweating, laughing, trembling as if charged with electricity. "Keep your son close! *Penis, no! Phallus, si!*"

Cheers now. Men stood and raised their fists. The drunk saw Erno's mother at the edge of the stage and took a step toward her. He said something, and while she and her partner stood irresolute, he put his big hand on her chest and shoved her away.

The other constable discharged his electric club against the man. The drunk's arms flew back, striking a bystander, and two other men surged forward and knocked down the constable. Erno's mother raised her own baton. More constables pushed toward the stage, using their batons, and other men rose to stop them. A table was upended, shouts echoed, the room was hot as hell and turning into a riot, the first riot in the Society of Cousins in fifty years.

As the crowd surged toward the exits or toward the constables, Erno ducked back to the hallway. He hesitated, and then Tyler Durden came stumbling out of the melee. He took a quick look at Erno. "What now, kid?"

"Come with me," Erno said. He grabbed Tyler's arm and pulled him around the bend in the end of the hall, past the crates to the warehouse door. He slammed the door behind them and propped an empty oxygen cylinder against it. "We can hide here until the thing dies down."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Erno."

"Well, Erno, are we sure we want to hide? Out there is more interesting."

Erno decided not to tell Tyler that one of the constables was his mother. "Are you serious?"

"I'm always serious." Durden wandered back from the door into the gloom of the cavern. He kicked a piece of rubble, which soared across the room and skidded up against the wall thirty meters away. "This place must have been here since the beginning. I'm surprised they're wasting the space. Probably full of toxics."

"You think so?" Erno said.

"Who knows?" Durden went toward the back of the warehouse, and Erno followed. It was cold, and their breath steamed the air. "Who would have figured the lights would still be growing," Durden said.

"A well established colony can last for fifty years or more," Erno said. "As long as there's enough moisture in the air. They break down the rock."

"You know all about it."

"I work in biotech," Erno said. "I'm a gene hacker."

Durden said nothing, and Erno felt the awkwardness of his boast.

They reached the far wall. Durden found the pressure door set into the dark alcove. He pulled a flashlight from his belt. The triangular yellow warning signs around the door were faded. He felt around the door seam.

"We probably ought to leave that alone," Erno said.

Durden handed Erno the flashlight, took a pry bar from his belt, and shoved it into the edge of the door. The door resisted, then with a grating squeak jerked open a couple of centimeters. Erno jumped at the sound.

"Help me out here, Erno," Durden said.

Erno got his fingers around the door's edge, and the two of them braced themselves. Durden put his feet up on the wall and used his legs and back to get leverage. When the door suddenly shot open Erno fell back and whacked his head. Durden lost his grip, shot sideways out of the alcove, bounced once, and skidded across the dusty floor. While Erno shook his head to clear his vision, Durden sat spread-legged, laughing. "Bingo!" He said. He bounced up. "You okay, Erno?"

Erno felt the back of his skull. He wasn't bleeding. "I'm fine," he said.

"Let's see what we've got, then."

Beyond the door a dark corridor cut through the basalt. Durden stepped into the path marked by his light. Erno wanted to go back to the club—by now things must have died down—but instead he followed.

Shortly past the door the corridor turned into a cramped lava tube. Early settlers had leveled the floor of the erratic tube formed by the draining away of cooling lava several billion years ago. Between walls that had been erected to form rooms ran a path of red volcanic gravel much like tailings from the oxygen factory. Foamy irregular pebbles kicked up by their shoes rattled off the walls. Dead light fixtures broke the ceiling at intervals. Tyler stopped to shine his light into a couple of the doorways, and at the third he went inside.

"This must be from the start of the colony," Erno said. "I wonder why it's been abandoned."

"Kind of claustrophobic." Durden shone the light around the small room.

The light fell on a small rectangular object in the corner. From his belt Durden pulled another tool, which he extended into a probe.

"Do you always carry this equipment?" Erno asked.

"Be prepared," Durden said. He set down the light and crouched over the object. It looked like a small box, a few centimeters thick. "You ever hear of the Boy Scouts, Erno?"

"Some early lunar colony?"

"Nope. Sort of like the Men's House, only different." Durden forced the probe under an edge, and one side lifted as if to come off. "Well, well!"

He put down the probe, picked up the object. He held it end-on, put his thumbs against the long side, and opened it. It divided neatly into flat sheets attached at the other long side.

"What is it?" Erno asked.

"It's a book."

"Is it still working?"

"This is an unpowered book. The words are printed right on these leaves. They're made of paper."

Erno had seen such old-fashioned books in vids. "It must be very old. What is it?"

Durden carefully turned the pages. "It's a book of stories." Durden stood up and handed the book to Erno. "Here. You keep it. Let me know what it's about."

Erno tried to make out the writing, but without Tyler's flashlight it was too dim.

Durden folded up his probe and hung it on his belt. He ran his hand over his head, smearing a line of dust over his scalp. "Are you cold? I suppose we ought to find our way out of here." Immediately he headed out of the room and back down the corridor.

Erno felt he was getting left behind in more ways than one. Clutching the book, he followed after Durden and his bobbing light. Rather than heading back to the Oxygen Warehouse, the comedian continued down the lava tube.

Eventually the tube ended in another old pressure door. When Durden touched the key panel at its side, amazingly, it lit.

"What do you think?" Durden said.

"We should go back," Erno said. "We can't know whether the lock door on the other side is still airtight. The fail-safes could be broken. We could open the door onto vacuum." He held the book under his armpit and blew on his cold hands.

"How old are you, Erno?"

"Seventeen."

"Seventeen?" Durden's eyes glinted in shadowed eye sockets. "Seventeen is no age to be cautious."

Erno couldn't help but grin. "You're right. Let's open it."

"My man, Erno!" Durden slapped him on the shoulder. He keyed the door open. They heard the whine of a long-unused electric motor. Erno could feel his heart beat, the blood running swiftly in his veins. At first nothing happened, then the door began to slide open. There was a chuff of air escaping from the lava tube, and dust kicked up. But the wind stopped as soon as it started, and the door opened completely on the old airlock, filled floor to ceiling with crates and bundles of fiberglass building struts.

It took them half an hour to shift boxes and burrow their way through the airlock, to emerge at the other end into another warehouse, this one still in use. They crept by racks of construction materials until they reached the entrance, and sneaked out into the colony corridor beyond.

They were at the far end of North Six, the giant lava tube that served the industrial wing of the colony. The few workers they encountered on the late shift might have noticed Erno's suit, but said nothing.

Erno and Tyler made their way back home. Tyler cracked jokes about the constables until they emerged into the vast open space of the domed crater that formed the center of the colony. Above, on the huge dome, was projected a night starfield. In the distance, down the rimwall slopes covered with junipers, across the crater floor, lights glinted among the trees in Sobieski Park. Erno took a huge breath, fragrant with piñon.

"The world our ancestors gave us," Tyler said, waving his arm as if offering it to Erno.

As Tyler turned to leave, Erno called out impulsively, "That was an adventure!"

"The first of many, Erno." Tyler said, and jogged away.

Celibacy Day

On Celibacy Day, everyone gets a day off from sex.

Some protest this practice, but they are relatively few. Most men take it as an opportunity to retreat to the informal Men's Houses that, though they *have no statutory sanction, sprang up in the first generation of settlers.*

In the Men's House, men and boys talk about what it is to be a man, a lover of other men and women, a father in a world where fatherhood is no more than a biological concept. They complain about their lot. They tell vile jokes and sing songs. They wrestle. They gossip. Heteros and queers and everyone in between compare speculations on what they think women really want, and whether it matters. They try to figure out what a true man is.

As a boy Erno would go to the Men's House with his mother's current partner or one of the other men involved in the household. Some of the men taught him things. He learned about masturbation, and cross checks, and Micro Language Theory.

But no matter how welcoming the men were supposed to be to each other—and they talked about brotherhood all the time—there was always that little edge when you met another boy there, or that necessary wariness when you talked to an adult. Men came to the Men's House to spend time together and remind themselves of certain congruencies, but only a crazy person would want to live solely in the company of men.

two

The founders of the Society of Cousins had a vision of women as independent agents, free thinkers forming alliances with other women to create a social bond so strong that men could not overwhelm them. Solidarity, sisterhood, motherhood. But Erno's mother was not like those women. Those women existed only in history vids, sitting in meeting circles, laughing, making plans, sure of themselves and complete.

Erno's mother was a cop. She had a cop's squinty eyes and a cop's suspicion of anyone who stepped outside of the norm. She had a cop's lack of imagination, except as she could imagine what people would do wrong.

Erno and his mother and his sister Celeste and his Aunt Sophie and his cousins Lena and Aphra, and various men some of whom may have been fathers, some of them Good Partners, and others just men, lived in an apartment in Sanger, on the third level of the northeast quadrant, a small place looking down on the farms that filled the floor of the crater they called Fowler, though the real Fowler was a much larger crater five kilometers distant.

Erno had his own room. He thought nothing of the fact that the girls had to share a room, and would be forced to move out when they turned fourteen. *Keep your son close, let your daughter go*, went the aphorism Tyler had mocked. Erno's mother was not about to challenge any aphorisms. Erno remembered her expression as she had stepped forward to arrest the drunk: sad that this man had forced her to this, and determined to do it. She was comfortable in the world; she saw no need for alternatives. Her cronies came by the apartment and shared coffee and gossip, and they were just like all the other mothers and sisters and aunts. None of them were extraordinary.

Not that any of the men Erno knew were extraordinary, either. Except Tyler Durden. And now Erno knew Durden, and they had spent a night breaking rules and getting away with it.

Celeste and Aphra were dishing up oatmeal when Erno returned to the apartment that morning. "Where were you?" his mother asked. She looked up from the table, more curious than upset, and Erno noticed a bruise on her temple.

"What happened to your forehead?" Erno asked.

His mother touched a hand to her forehead, as if she had forgotten it. She waved the hand in dismissal.

"There was trouble at a club in the enterprise district," Aunt Sophie said. "The constables had to step in, and your mother was assaulted."

"It was a riot!" Lena said eagerly. "There's going to be a big meeting about it in the park today." Lena was a month from turning fourteen, and looking forward to voting.

Erno sat down at the table. As he did so he felt the book, which he had tucked into his belt at the small of his back beneath his now rumpled suit jacket. He leaned forward, pulled a bowl of oatmeal toward him and took up a spoon. Looking down into the bowl to avoid anyone's eyes, he idly asked, "What's the meeting for?"

"One of the rioters was knocked into a coma," Lena said. "The social order committee wants this comedian Tyler Durden to be made invisible."

Erno concentrated on his spoon. "Why?"

"You know about him?" his mother asked.

Before he had to think of an answer, Nick Farahsson, his mother's partner, shambled into the kitchen. "Lord, Pam, don't you pay attention? Erno's one of his biggest fans."

His mother turned on Erno. "Is that so?"

Erno looked up from his bowl and met her eyes. She looked hurt. "I've heard of him."

"Heard of him?" Nick said. "Erno, I bet you were there last night."

"I bet *you* weren't there," Erno said.

Nick stretched. "I don't need to hear him. I have no complaints." He came up behind Erno's mother, nuzzled the nape of her neck and cupped her breast in his hand.

She turned her face up and kissed him on the cheek. "I should hope not."

Lena made a face. "Heteros. I can't wait until I get out of here." She had recently declared herself a lesbian and was quite judgmental about it.

"You'd better get to your practicum, Lena," Aunt Sophie said. "Let your aunt take care of her own sex life."

"This guy Durden is setting himself up for a major fall," said Nick. "Smells like a case of abnormal development. Who's his mother?"

Erno couldn't keep quiet. "He doesn't have a mother. He doesn't need one."

"Parthenogenesis," Aunt Sophie said. "I didn't think it had been perfected yet."

"If they ever do, what happens to me?" Nick said.

"You have your uses." Erno's mother nudged her shoulder against his hip.

"You two can go back to your room," Aunt Sophie said. "We'll take care of things for you."

"No need." Nick grabbed a bowl of oatmeal and sat down. "Thank you, sweetheart," he said to Aphra. "I can't see what this guy's problem is."

"Doesn't it bother you that you can't vote?" Erno said. "What's fair about that?"

"I don't want to vote," Nick said.

"You're a complete drone."

His mother frowned at him. Erno pushed his bowl away and left for his room.

"You're the one with special tutoring!" Lena called. "The nice clothes. What work do you do?"

"Shut up," Erno said softly, but his ears burned.

He had nothing to do until his 1100 biotech tutorial, and he didn't even have to go if he didn't want to. Lena was right about that, anyway. He threw the book on his bed, undressed, and switched on his screen. On the front page was a report of solar activity approaching its eleven-year peak, with radiation warnings issued for all surface activity. Erno called up the calendar. There it was: a discussion on Tyler Durden was scheduled in the amphitheater at 1600. Linked was a vid of the riot and a forum for open citizen comment. A cousin named Tashi Yokiosson had been clubbed in the fight and was in a coma, undergoing nanorepair.

Erno didn't know him, but that didn't prevent his anger. He considered calling up Tyrus or Sid, finding out what had happened to them, and telling them about his adventure with Tyler. But that would spoil the secret, and it might get around to his mother. Yet he couldn't let his night with Tyler go uncelebrated. He opened his journal, and wrote a poem:

Going outside the crater
finding the lost tunnels
of freedom
and male strength.
Searching with your brother
shoulder to shoulder
like men.

Getting below the surface
of a stifling society
sounding your XY shout.
Flashing your colors
like an ancient Spartan bird
proud, erect, never to be softened
by the silent embrace of woman

No females aloud.

Not bad. It had some of the raw honesty of the beats. He would read it at the next meeting of the Poets' Club. He saved it with the four hundred other poems he had written in the last year: Erno prided himself on being the most prolific poet in his class. He had already won four Laurel Awards, one for best Lyric, one for best Sonnet, and two for best Villanelle—plus a Snappie for best limerick of 2097. He was sure to make Bard at an earlier age than anyone since Patrick Maurasson.

Erno switched off the screen, lay on his bed, and remembered the book. He dug it out from under his discarded clothes. It had a blue cover, faded to purple near the binding, made of some sort of fabric. Embossed on the front was a torch encircled by a laurel wreath. He opened the book to its title page: *Stories for Men,* "An Anthology by Charles Grayson." Published in August 1936, in the United States of America.

As a fan of Earth culture, Erno knew that most Earth societies used the patronymic, so that Gray, Grayson's naming parent, would be a man, not a woman.

Stories for men. The authors on the contents page were all men—except perhaps for odd names like "Dashiell." Despite Erno's interest in twentieth-century popular art, only a couple were familiar. William Faulkner he knew was considered a major Earth writer, and he had seen the name Hemingway before, though he had associated it only with a style of furniture. But even assuming the stories were all written by men, the title said the book was stories *for* men, not stories *by* men.

How did a story for a man differ from a story for a woman? Erno had never considered the idea before. He had heard storytellers in the park, and read books in school—Murasaki, Chopin, Cather, Ellison, Morrison, Ferenc, Sabinsdaughter. As a child, he had loved the Alice books, and *Flatland,* and Maria Hidalgo's kids' stories, and Seuss. None seemed particularly male or female.

He supposed the cousins did have their own stories for men. Nick loved interactive serials, tortured romantic tales of interpersonal angst set in the patriarchal world, where men struggled against injustice until they found the right women and were taken care of. Erno stuck to poetry. His favorite novel was Tawanda Tamikasdaughter's *The Dark Blood*—the story of a misunderstood young Cousin's struggles against his overbearing mother, climaxed when his father miraculously reveals himself and brings the mother to heel. At the Men's House, he had also seen his share of porn—thrillers set on Earth where men forced women to do whatever the men wanted, and like it.

But this book did not look like porn. A note at the beginning promised the book contained material to "interest, or alarm, or amuse, or instruct, or—and possibly most important of all—entertain you." Erno wondered that Tyler had found this particular 160-year-old book in the lava tube. It seemed too unlikely to be coincidence.

What sort of things would entertain an Earthman of 1936? Erno turned to the first story, "The Ambassador of Poker" by "Achmed Abdullah."

But the archaic text was frustratingly passive—nothing more than black type physically impressed on the pages, without links or explanations. After a paragraph or so rife with obscure cultural references—"cordovan brogues," "knickerbockers," "County Sligo," "a four-in-hand"—Erno's night without sleep caught up with him, and he dozed off.

Heroes

Why does a man remain in the Society of Cousins, when he would have much more authority outside of it, in one of the other lunar colonies, or on Earth?

For one thing, the sex is great.

Men are valued for their sexuality, praised for their potency, competed for by women. From before puberty, a boy is schooled by both men and women on how to give pleasure. A man who can give such pleasure has high status. He is recognized and respected throughout the colony. He is welcome in any bed. He is admired and envied by other men.

three

Erno woke suddenly, sweaty and disoriented, trailing the wisps of a dream that faded before he could call it back. He looked at his clock: 1530. He was going to miss the meeting.

He washed his face, applied personal hygiene bacteria, threw on his embroidered jumpsuit, and rushed out of the apartment.

The amphitheater in Sobieski Park was filling as Erno arrived. Five or six hundred people were already there; other cousins would be watching on the link. The dome presented a clear blue sky, and the ring of heliotropes around its zenith flooded the air with sunlight. A slight breeze rustled the old oaks, hovering over the semicircular ranks of seats like aged grandmothers. People came in twos and threes, adults and children, along the paths that led down from the colony perimeter road through the farmlands to the park. Others emerged from the doors at the base of the central spire that supported the dome. Erno found a seat in the top row, far from the stage, off to one side where the seats gave way to grass.

Chairing the meeting was Debra Debrasdaughter. Debrasdaughter was a tiny sixty-year-old woman who, though she had held public office infrequently and never for long, was one of the most respected cousins. She had been Erno's teacher when he was six, and he remembered how she'd sat with him and worked through his feud with Bill Grettasson. She taught him how to play forward on the soccer team. On the soccer field she had been fast and sudden as a bug. She had a warm laugh and sharp brown eyes.

Down on the stage, Debrasdaughter was hugging the secretary. Then the sound person hugged Debrasdaughter. They both hugged the secretary again. A troubled-looking old man sat down in the front row, and all three of them got down off the platform and hugged him. He brushed his hand along Debrasdaughter's thigh, but it was plain that his heart wasn't in it. She kissed his cheek and went back up on the stage.

A flyer wearing red wings swooped over the amphitheater and soared back up again, slowly beating the air. Another pair of flyers were racing around the perimeter of the crater, silhouetted against the clusters of apartments built into the crater walls. A thousand meters above his head Erno could spy a couple of others on the edge of the launch platform at the top of the spire. As he watched, squinting against the sunlight, one of the tiny figures spread its wings and pushed off, diving down, at first ever so slowly, gaining speed, then, with a flip of wings, soaring out level. Erno could feel it in his own shoulders, the stress that maneuver put on your arms. He didn't like flying. Even in lunar gravity, the chances of a fall were too big.

The amplified voice of Debrasdaughter drew him back to the amphitheater. "Thank you, Cousins, for coming," she said. "Please come to order."

Erno saw that Tyler Durden had taken a seat off to one side of the stage. He wore flaming red coveralls, like a shout.

"A motion has been made to impose a decree of invisibility against Thomas Marysson, otherwise known as Tyler Durden, for a period of one year. We are met here for the first of two discussions over this matter, prior to holding a colony-wide vote."

Short of banishment, invisibility was the colony's maximum social sanction. Should the motion carry, Tyler would be formally ostracized. Tagged by an AI, continuously monitored, he would not be acknowledged by other cousins. Should he attempt to harm anyone, the AI would trigger receptors in his brain stem to put him to sleep.

"This motion was prompted by the disturbances that have ensued as a result of public performances of Thomas Marysson. The floor is now open for discussion."

A very tall woman who had been waiting anxiously stood, and as if by pre-arrangement, Debrasdaughter recognized her. The hovering mikes picked up her high voice. "I am Yokio Kumiosdaughter. My son is in the hospital as a result of this shameful episode. He is a good boy. He is the kind of boy we all want, and I don't understand how he came to be in that place. I pray that he recovers and lives to become the good man I know he can be.

"We must not let this happen to anyone else's son. At the very least, Invisibility will give Thomas Marysson the opportunity to reflect on his actions before he provokes another such tragedy."

Another woman rose. Erno saw it was Rosamund Demisdaughter.

"With due respect to Cousin Kumiosdaughter, I don't believe the riot in my club was Tyler's fault. Her son brought this on himself. Tyler is not responsible for the actions of the patrons. Since when do we punish people for the misbehavior of others?

"The real mistake was sending constables," Rosamund continued. "Whether or not the grievances Tyler gives vent to are real or only perceived, we must allow any cousins to speak their mind. The founders understood that men and women are different. By sending armed officers into that club, we threatened the right of those men who came to see Tyler Durden to be different."

"It was stupid strategy!" someone interrupted. "They could have arrested Durden easily after the show."

"Arrested him? On what grounds?" another woman asked.

Rosamund continued. "Adil Al-Hafez said it when he helped Nora Sobieski raise the money for this colony: 'The cousins are a new start for men as much as women. We do not seek to change men, but to offer them the opportunity to be other than they have been.'"

A man Erno recognized from the biotech factory took the floor. "It's all very well to quote the founders back at us, but they were realists too. Men *are* different. Personalized male power has made the history of Earth one long tale of slaughter, oppression, rape, and war. Sobieski and Al-Hafez and the rest knew that, too: The California massacre sent them here. Durden's incitements will inevitably cause trouble. This kid wouldn't have gotten hurt without him. We can't stand by while the seeds of institutionalized male aggression are planted."

"This is a free speech issue!" a young woman shouted.

"It's not about speech," the man countered. "It's about violence."

Debrasdaughter called for order. The man looked sheepish and sat down. A middle-aged woman with a worried expression stood. "What about organizing a new round of games? Let them work it out on the rink, the flying drome, the playing field."

"We have games of every description," another woman responded. "You think we can make Durden join the hockey team?"

The old man in the front row croaked out, "Did you see that game last week against Aristarchus? They could use a little more organized male aggression!" That drew a chorus of laughter from the crowd.

When the noise died down, an elderly woman took the floor. "I have been a cousin for seventy years," she said. "I've seen troublemakers. There will always be troublemakers. But what's happened to the Good Partners? I remember the North tube blowout of '32. Sixty people died. Life here was brutal and dangerous. But men and women worked together shoulder to shoulder; we shared each other's joys and sorrows. We were good bedmates then. Where is that spirit now?"

Erno had heard such tiresome sermonettes about the old days a hundred times. The discussion turned into a cacophony of voices.

"What are we going to do?" said another woman. "Deprive men of the right to speak?"

"Men are already deprived of the vote! How many voters are men?"

"By living on the colony stipend, men *choose* not to vote. Nobody is stopping you from going to work."

"We work already! How much basic science do men do? Look at the work Laurasson did on free energy. And most of the artists are men."

"—they have the time to devote to science and art, *because of* the material support of the community. They have the luxury of intellectual pursuit."

"And all decisions about what to do with their work are made by women."

"The decisions, which will affect the lives of everyone in the society, are made not by women, but by voters."

"And most voters are women."

"Back to beginning of argument!" someone shouted. "Reload program and repeat."

A smattering of laughter greeted the sarcasm. Debrasdaughter smiled. "These are general issues, and to a certain degree I am content to let them be aired. But do they bear directly on the motion? What, if anything, are we to do about Thomas Marysson?"

She looked over at Tyler, who looked back at her coolly, his legs crossed.

A woman in a constable's uniform rose. "The problem with Thomas Marysson is that he claims the privileges of artistic expression, but he's not really an artist. He's a provocateur."

"Most of the artists in history have been provocateurs," shot back a small, dark man.

"He makes *me* laugh," said another.

"He's smart. Instead of competing with other men, he wants to organize them. He encourages them to band together."

The back-and-forth rambled on. Despite Debrasdaughter's attempt to keep order, the discussion ran into irrelevant byways, circular arguments, vague calls for comity, and general statements of male and female grievance. Erno had debated all this stuff a million times with the guys at the gym. It annoyed him that Debrasdaughter did not force the speakers to stay on point. But that was typical of a cousins' meeting—they would talk endlessly, letting every nitwit have her say, before actually getting around to deciding anything.

A young woman stood to speak, and Erno saw it was Alicia Keikosdaughter. Alicia and he had shared a tutorial in math, and she had been the second girl he had ever had sex with.

"Of course Durden wants to be seen as an artist," Alicia said. "There's no mystique about the guy who works next to you in the factory. Who wants to sleep with him? The truth—"

"I will!" A good-looking woman interrupted Alicia.

The assembly laughed.

"The truth—" Alicia tried to continue.

The woman ignored her. She stood, her hand on the head of the little girl at her side, and addressed Tyler Durden directly. "I think you need to get laid!" She turned to the others. "Send him around to me! I'll take care of any revolutionary impulses he might have." More laughter.

Erno could see Alicia's shoulders slump, and she sat down. It was a typical case of a matron ignoring a young woman. He got up, moved down the aisle, and slid into a spot next to her.

Alicia turned to him. "Erno. Hello."

"It's not your fault they won't listen," he said. Alicia was wearing a tight satin shirt and Erno could not help but notice her breasts.

She kissed him on the cheek. She turned to the meeting, then back to him. "What do you think they're going to do?"

"They're going to ostracize him, I'll bet."

"I saw him on link. Have you seen him?"

"I was there last night."

Alicia leaned closer. "Really?" she said. Her breath was fragrant, and her lips full. There was a tactile quality to Alicia that Erno found deeply sexy—when she talked to you she would touch your shoulder or bump her knee against yours, as if to reassure herself that you were really there. "Did you get in the fight?"

A woman on the other side of Alicia leaned over. "If you two aren't going to pay attention, at least be quiet so the rest of us can."

Erno started to say something, but Alicia put her hand on his arm. "Let's go for a walk."

Erno was torn. Boring or not, he didn't want to miss the meeting, but it was hard to ignore Alicia. She was a year younger than Erno yet was already on her own, living with Sharon Yasminsdaughter while studying environmental social work. One time Erno had heard her argue with Sharon whether it was true that women on Earth could not use elevators because if they did they would inevitably be raped.

They left the amphitheater and walked through the park. Erno told Alicia his version of the riot at the club, leaving out his exploring the deserted lava tube with Tyler.

"Even if they don't make him invisible," Alicia said, "you know that somebody is going to make sure he gets the message."

"He hasn't hurt anyone. Why aren't we having a meeting about the constable who clubbed Yokiosson?"

"The constable was attacked. A lot of cousins feel threatened. I'm not even sure how I feel."

"The Unwritten Law," Erno muttered.

"The what?"

"Tyler does a bit about it. It was an Earth custom, in most of the patriarchies. The 'unwritten law' said that, if a wife had sex with anyone other than her husband, the husband had the right to kill her and her lover, and no court would hold him guilty."

"That's because men had all the power."

"But you just said somebody would send Tyler a message. Up here, if a man abuses a woman, even threatens to, then the abused woman's friends take revenge. When was the last time anyone did anything about that?"

"I get it, Erno. That must seem unfair."

"Men don't abuse women here."

"Maybe that's why."

"It doesn't make it right."

"You're right, Erno. It doesn't. I'm on your side."

Erno sat down on the ledge of the pool surrounding the fountains. The fountains were the pride of the colony: in a conspicuous show of water consumption the pools surrounded the central spire and wandered beneath the park's trees. Genetically altered carp swam in their green depths, and the air was more humid here than anywhere else under the dome.

Alicia sat next to him. "Remind me why we broke up," Erno said.

"Things got complicated." She had said the same thing the night she told him they shouldn't sleep together anymore. He still didn't know what that meant, and he suspected she said it only to keep from saying something that might wound him deeply. Much as he wanted to insist that he would prefer her honesty, he wasn't sure he could stand it.

"I'm going crazy at home," he told Alicia. "Mother treats me like a child. Lena is starting to act like she's better than me. I do real work at Biotech, but that doesn't matter."

"You'll be in university soon. You're a premium gene hacker."

"Who says?" Erno asked.

"People."

"Yeah, right. And if I am, I still live at home. I'm going to end up just like Nick," he said, "the pet male in a household full of females."

"Maybe something will come of this. Things can change."

"If only," Erno said morosely. But he was surprised and gratified to have Alicia's encouragement. Maybe she cared for him after all. "There's one thing, Alicia . . . I could move in with you."

Alicia raised an eyebrow. He pressed on. "Like you say, I'll be studying at the university next session. . . ."

She put her hand on his leg. "There's not much space, with Sharon and me. We couldn't give you your own room."

"I'm not afraid of sharing a bed. I can alternate between you."

"You're so manly, Erno!" she teased.

"I aim to please," he said, and struck a pose. Inside he cringed. It was a stupid thing to say, so much a boy trying to talk big.

Alicia did a generous thing—she laughed. There was affection and understanding in it. It made him feel they were part of some club together. Erno hadn't realized how afraid he was that she would mock him. Neither said anything for a moment. A finch landed on the branch above them, turned its head sideways and inspected them. "You know, you could be just like Tyler Durden, Erno."

Erno started—what did she mean by that? He looked her in the face. Alicia's eyes were calm and green, flecked with gold. He hadn't looked into her eyes since they had been lovers.

She kissed him. Then she touched his lips with her finger. "Don't say anything. I'll talk to Sharon."

He put his arm around her. She melted into him.

In the distance the sounds of the debate were broken by a burst of laughter. "Let's go back," she said.

"All right," he said reluctantly.

They walked back to the amphitheater and found seats in the top row, beside two women in their twenties who joked with each other.

"This guy is no Derek Silviasson," one of them said.

"If he could fuck like Derek, now *that* would be comedy," said her blond partner.

Debrasdaughter was calling for order.

"We cannot compel any cousin to indulge in sex against his will. If he chooses to be celibate, and encourages his followers to be celibate, we can't prevent that without undermining the very freedoms we came here to establish."

Nick Farahsson, his face red and his voice contorted, shouted out, "You just said the key word—followers! We don't need followers here. Followers have ceded their autonomy to a hierarchy. Followers are the tool of phallocracy. Followers started the riot." Erno saw his mother, sitting next to Nick, try to calm him.

Another man spoke. "What a joke! We're all a bunch of followers! Cousins follow customs as slavishly as any Earth patriarch."

"What I don't understand," someone called out directly to Tyler, "is, if you hate it here so much, why don't you just leave? Don't let the airlock door clip your ass on the way out."

"This is my home, too," Tyler said.

He stood and turned to Debrasdaughter. "If you don't mind, I would like to speak."

"We'd be pleased to hear what you have to say," Debrasdaughter said. The trace of a smile on her pale face made her look girlish despite her gray hair. "Speaking for myself, I've been waiting."

Tyler ran his hand over his shaved scalp, came to the front of the platform. He looked up at his fellow citizens, and smiled. "I think you've outlined all the positions pretty clearly so far. I note that Tashi Yokiosson didn't say anything, but maybe he'll get back to us later. It's been a revealing discussion, and now I'd just like to ask you to help me out with a demonstration. Will you do this little thing for me?

"I'd like you all to put your hand over your eyes. Like this—" He covered his own eyes with his palm, peeked out. Most of the assembly did as he asked. "All of you got your eyes covered? Good!

"Because, sweethearts, this is the closest I am going to get to invisibility."

Tyler threw his arms wide, and laughed.

"Make me invisible? You can't see me now! You don't recognize a man whose word is steel, whose reality is not dependent on rules. Men have fought and bled and died for you. Men put their lives on the line for every microscopic step forward our pitiful race has made. Nothing's more visible than the sacrifices men have made for the good of their wives and daughters. Yes, women died too—but they were *real* women, women not threatened by the existence of masculinity.

"You see that tower?" Tyler pointed to the thousand-meter spire looming over their heads. "I can climb that tower! I can fuck every real woman in this amphitheater. I eat a lot of food, drink a lot of alcohol, and take a lot of drugs. I'm *bigger* than you are. I sweat more. I howl like a dog. I make noise. You think anyone can make more noise than me?

"One way or another, Mama, I'm going to keep you awake all night! And *you* think you're the girl that can stop me?

"My Uncle Dick told me when I was a boy, son, don't take it out unless you intend to use it! Well, it's out and it's in use! Rim ram god damn, sonafabitch fuck! It is to laugh. This whole discussion's been a waste of oxygen. I'm real, I'm here, get used to it.

"Invisible? Just *try* not to see me."

Then Tyler crouched and leapt, three meters into the air, tucked, did a roll. Coming down, he landed on his hands and did a handspring. The second his feet touched the platform, he shot off the side and ran, taking long, loping strides out of the park and through the cornfields.

A confused murmur rippled through the assembly, broken by a few angry calls. Many puzzled glances. Some people stood.

Debrasdaughter called for order. "I'll ask the assembly to calm down," she said.

Gradually, quiet came.

"I'm sure we are all stimulated by that very original statement. I don't think we are going to get any farther today, and I note that it is coming on time for the swing shifters to leave, so unless there are serious objections I would like to call this meeting to a close.

"The laws call for a second open meeting a week from today, followed by a polling period of three days, at the end of which the will of the colony will be made public and enacted. Do I hear any further discussion?"

There was none.

"Then I hereby adjourn this meeting. We will meet again one week from today at 1600 hours. Anyone who wishes to post a statement in regard to this matter may do so at the colony site, where a room will be open continuously for debate. Thank you for your participation."

People began to break up, talking. The two women beside Erno, joking, left the theater.

Alicia stood. "Was that one of his routines?"

Tyler's speech had stirred something in Erno that made him want to shout. He was grinning from ear to ear. "It is to laugh," he murmured.

Alicia grabbed Erno's wrist. She pulled a pen from her pocket, turned his hand so the palm lay open, and on it wrote "Gilman 334."

"Before you do anything stupid, Erno," she said, "call me."

"Define stupid," he said.

But Alicia had turned away. He felt the tingle of the writing on his hand as he watched her go.

Work

Men are encouraged to apply for an exemption from the mita: *the compulsory weekly labor that each cousin devotes to the support of the colony. The cost of this exemption is forfeiture of the right to vote. As artists, writers, artisans, athletes, performers, and especially as scientists, men have an easier path than women. Their interests are supported to the limits of the cousins' resources. But this is not accorded the designation of* work, *and all practical decisions as to what to do with any creations of their art or discoveries they might make, are left to voters, who are overwhelmingly women.*

Men who choose such careers are praised as public-spirited volunteers, sacrificing for the sake of the community. At the same time, they live a life of relative ease, pursuing their interests. They compete with each other for the attentions of women. They may exert influence, but have no legal responsibilities, and no other responsibilities except as they choose them. They live like sultans, but without power. Or like gigolos. Peacocks, and studs.

And those who choose to do work? *Work—ah, work is different. Work is mundane labor directed toward support of the colony. Male workers earn no honors, accumulate no status. And because men are always outnumbered by women on such jobs, they have little chance of advancement to a position of authority. They just can't get the votes.*

"Twenty-Five Bucks"

Erno began to puzzle out some of the *Stories for Men.* One was about a "prize fighter"—a man who fought another man with his fists for money. This aging fighter agrees with a promoter to fight a younger, stronger man for "twenty-five bucks," which from context Erno gathered was a small sum of money. The boxer spends his time in the ring avoiding getting beaten up. During a pause between the "rounds" of the fight, the promoter comes to him and complains that he is not fighting hard enough, and swears he will not pay the boxer if he "takes a dive." So in the next round the boxer truly engages in the brutal battle, and within a minute gets beaten unconscious.

But because this happens immediately after the promoter spoke to him, in the sight of the audience, the audience assumes the boxer was *told* by the promoter to take a dive. They protest. Rather than defend the boxer, the promoter denies him the twenty-five bucks anyway.

The boxer, unconscious while the promoter and audience argue, dies of a brain hemorrhage.

The story infuriated Erno. It felt so *wrong*. Why did the boxer take on the fight? Why did he allow himself to be beaten so badly? Why did the promoter betray the boxer? What was the point of the boxer's dying in the end? Why did the writer—someone named James T. Farrell—invent this grim tale?

four

A week after the meeting, when Erno logged onto school, he found a message for him from "Ethan Edwards." It read:

> I saw you with that girl. Cute. But no sex, Erno. I'm counting on men like you.

Erno sent a reply: "You promised me another adventure. When?"

Then he did biochemistry ("Delineate the steps in the synthesis of human growth hormone") and read Gender & Art for three hours until he had to get to his practicum at biotech.

In order to reduce the risk of stray bugs getting loose in the colony, the biotech factories were located in a bunker separate from the main crater. Workers had to don pressure suits and ride a bus for a couple of kilometers across the lunar surface. A crowd of other biotech workers already filled the locker room at the north airlock when Erno arrived.

"Tyrus told me you're fucking Alicia Keikosdaughter, Erno," said Paul Gwynethsson, whose locker was next to Erno's. "He was out flying. He saw you in the park."

"So? Who are you fucking?" Erno asked. He pulled on his skintight. The fabric, webbed with thermoregulators, sealed itself, the suit's environment system powered up, and Erno locked down his helmet. The helmet's head's-up display was green. He and Paul went to the airlock, passed their ID's through the reader and entered with the others. The exit sign posted the solar storm warning. Paul teased Erno about Alicia as the air was cycled through the lock and they walked out through the radiation maze to the surface.

They got on the bus that dropped off the previous biotech shift. The bus bumped away in slow motion down the graded road. It was late in the lunar afternoon, probably only a day or so of light before the two-week night. If a storm should be detected and the alert sounded, they would have maybe twenty minutes to find shelter before the radiation flux hit the exposed surface. But the ride to the lab went uneventfully.

A man right off the cable train from Tsander was doing a practicum in the lab. His name was Cluny. Like so many Earthmen, he was short and impressively muscled, and spoke slowly, with an odd accent. Cluny was not yet a citizen and had not taken a cousins name. He was still going through training before qualifying to apply for exemption from the *mita*.

Erno interrupted Cluny as he carried several racks of micro-environment bulbs to the sterilizer. He asked Cluny what he thought of Tyler Durden.

Cluny was closemouthed; perhaps he thought Erno was testing him: "I think if he doesn't like it up here, I can show him lots of places on Earth happy to take him."

Erno let him get on with his work. Cluny was going to have a hard time over the next six months. The culture shock would be nothing next to the genetic manipulation he would have to undergo to adjust him for low-G. The life expectancy of an unmodified human on the moon was forty-eight. No exercise regimen or drugs could prevent the cardiovascular atrophy and loss of bone mass that humans evolved for Earth would suffer.

But the retroviruses could alter the human genome to produce solid fibrolaminar bones in 1/6 G, prevent plaque buildup in arteries, insure pulmonary health, and prevent a dozen other fatal low-G syndromes.

At the same time, licensing biotech discoveries was the colony's major source of foreign exchange, so research was under tight security. Erno pressed his thumb against the gene scanner. He had to go through three levels of clearances to access the experiment he had been working on. Alicia was right—Erno was getting strokes for his rapid learning in gene techniques, and already had a rep. Even better, he liked it. He could spend hours brainstorming synergistic combinations of alterations in mice, adapting Earth genotypes for exploitation.

Right now he was assigned to the ecological design section under Lemmy Odillesson, the premiere agricultural genobotanist. Lemmy was working on giant plane trees. He had a vision of underground bioengineered forests, entire ecosystems introduced to newly opened lava tubes that would transform dead, airless immensities into habitable biospheres. He wanted to live in a city of underground lunar tree houses.

Too soon Erno's six-hour shift was over. He suited up, climbed to the surface, and took the bus back to the north airlock. As the shift got off, a figure came up to Erno from the shadows of the radiation maze.

It was a big man in a tiger-striped skintight, his faceplate opaqued. Erno shied away from him, but the man held his hands, palms up, in front of him to indicate no threat. He came closer, leaned forward. Erno flinched. The man took Erno's shoulder, gently, and pulled him forward until the black faceplate of his helmet kissed Erno's own.

"Howdy, Erno." Tyler Durden's voice, carried by conduction from a face he could not see, echoed like Erno's own thought.

Erno tried to regain his cool. "Mr. Durden, I presume."

"Switch your suit to Channel Six," Tyler said. "Encrypted." He pulled away and touched the pad on his arm, and pointed to Erno's. When Erno did the same, his radio found Tyler's wavelength, and he heard Tyler's voice in his ear.

"I thought I might catch you out here."

The other workers had all passed by; they were alone. "What are you doing here?"

"You want adventure? We got adventure."

"What adventure?"

"Come along with me."

Instead of heading in through the maze, Tyler led Erno back out to the surface. The fan of concrete was deserted, the shuttle bus already gone back to the lab and factories. From around a corner, Tyler hauled out a backpack, settled it over his shoulders, and struck off east, along the graded road that encircled Fowler. The mountainous rim rose to their right, topped by the beginnings of the dome; to their left was the rubble of the broken highlands. Tyler moved along at a quick pace, taking long strides in the low G with a minimum of effort.

After a while Tyler asked him, "So, how about the book? Have you read it?"

"Some. It's a collection of stories, all about men."

"Learning anything?"

"They seem so primitive. I guess it was a different world back then."

"What's so different?"

Erno told him the story about the prizefighter. "Did they really do that?"

"Yes. Men have always engaged in combat."

"For money?"

"The money is just an excuse. They do it anyway."

"But why did the writer tell that story? What's the point?"

"It's about elemental manhood. The fighters were men. The promoter was not."

"Because he didn't pay the boxer?"

"Because he knew the boxer had fought his heart out, but he pretended that the boxer was a coward in order to keep the audience from getting mad at him. The promoter preserved his own credibility by trashing the boxer's. The author wants you to be like the boxer, not the promoter."

"But the boxer dies—for twenty-five bucks."

"He died a man. Nobody can take that away from him."

"But nobody knows that. In fact, they all think he died a coward."

"The promoter knows he wasn't. The other fighter knows, probably. And thanks to the story, now you know, too."

Erno still had trouble grasping exactly the metaphor Tyler intended when he used the term "man." It had nothing to do with genetics. But before he could quiz Tyler, the older man stopped. By this time they had circled a quarter of the colony and were in the shadow of the crater wall. Tyler switched on his helmet light and Erno did likewise. Erno's thermoregulator pumped heat along the microfibers buried in his suit's skin, compensating for the sudden shift from the brutal heat of lunar sunlight to the brutal cold of lunar darkness.

"Here we are," Tyler said, looking up the crater wall. "See that path?"

It wasn't much of a path, just a jumble of rocks leading up the side of the crater, but once they reached it Erno could see that, by following patches of luminescent paint on boulders, you could climb the rim mountain to the top. "Where are we going?" Erno asked.

"To the top of the world," Tyler said. "From up there I'll show you the empire I'll give you if you follow me."

"You're kidding."

Tyler said nothing.

It was a hard climb to the crater's lip, where a concrete rim formed the foundation of the dome. From here, the dome looked like an unnaturally swollen stretch of *mare,* absurdly regular, covered in lunar regolith. Once the dome had been constructed over the crater, about six meters of lunar soil had been spread evenly over its surface to provide a radiation shield for the interior. Concentric rings every ten meters kept the soil from sliding down the pitch of the dome. It was easier climbing here, but surreal. The horizon of the dome moved ahead of them as they progressed, and it was hard to judge distances.

"There's a solar storm warning," Erno said. "Aren't you worried?"

"We're not going to be out long."

"I was at the meeting," Erno said.

"I saw you," Tyler said. "Cute girl, the dark skinned one. Watch out. You know what they used to say on Earth?"

"What?"

"If women didn't have control of all the pussy, they'd have bounties on their heads."

Erno laughed. "How can you say that? They're our sisters, our mothers."

"And they still have control of all the pussy."

They climbed the outside of the dome.

"What are you going to do to keep from being made invisible?" Erno asked.

"What makes you think they're going to try?"

"I don't think your speech changed anybody's mind."

"So? No matter what they teach you, my visibility is not socially constructed. That's the lesson for today."

"What are we doing out here?"

"We're going to do demonstrate this fact."

Ahead of them a structure hove into sight. At the apex of the dome, just above the central spire, stood a maintenance airlock. Normally, this would be the way workers would exit to inspect or repair the dome's exterior—not the way Erno and Tyler had come. This was not a public airlock, and the entrance code would be encrypted.

Tyler led them up to the door. From his belt pouch he took a key card and stuck it into the reader. Erno could hear him humming a song over his earphones. After a moment, the door slid open.

"In we go, Erno," Tyler said.

They entered the airlock and waited for the air to recycle. "This could get us into trouble," Erno said.

"Yes, it could."

"If you can break into the airlock you can sabotage it. An airlock breach could kill hundreds of people."

"You're absolutely right, Erno. That's why only completely responsible people like us should break into airlocks."

The interior door opened into a small chamber facing an elevator. Tyler put down his backpack, cracked the seal on his helmet and began stripping off his garish suit. Underneath he wore only briefs. Rust-colored pubic hair curled from around the edges of the briefs. Tyler's skin was pale; the muscles in his arms and chest well developed, but his belly soft. His skin was crisscrossed with a web of pink lines where the thermoregulator system of the suit had marked him.

Feeling self-conscious, Erno took off his own suit. They were the same height, but Tyler outweighed him by twenty kilos. "What's in the backpack?" Erno asked.

"Rappelling equipment." Tyler gathered up his suit and the pack and, ignoring the elevator, opened the door beside it to a stairwell. "Leave your suit here," he said, ditching his own in a corner.

The stairwell was steep and the cold air tasted stale; it raised goose bumps on Erno's skin. Clutching the pack to his chest, Tyler hopped down the stairs to the next level. The wall beside them was sprayed with gray insulation. The light from bioluminescents turned their skin greenish yellow.

Instead of continuing down the well all the way to the top of the spire, Tyler stopped at a door on the side of the stairwell. He punched in a code. The door opened into a vast darkness, the space between the exterior and interior shells of the dome. Tyler shone his light inside: Three meters high, broken by reinforcing struts, the cavity stretched out from them into the darkness, curving slightly as it fell away. Tyler closed the door behind them and, in the light of his flash, pulled a notebook from the pack and called up a map. He studied it for a minute, and then led Erno into the darkness.

To the right about ten meters, an impenetrable wall was one of the great cermet ribs of the dome that stretched like the frame of an umbrella from the central spire to the distant crater rim.

Before long Tyler stopped, shining his light on the floor. "Here it is."

"What?"

"Maintenance port. Periodically they have to inspect the interior of the dome, repair the fiberoptics." Tyler squatted down and began to open the lock.

"What are you going to do?"

"We're going to hang from the roof like little spiders, Erno, and leave a gift for our cousins."

The port opened and Erno got a glimpse of the space that yawned below. A thousand meters below them the semicircular ranks of seats of the Sobieski Park amphitheater glowed ghostly white in the lights of the artificial night. Tyler drew ropes and carabineers from his pack, and from the bottom, an oblong device, perhaps fifty centimeters square, wrapped in fiberoptic cloth that glinted in the light of the flashlight. At one end was a timer. The object gave off an aura of threat that was both frightening and instantly attractive.

"What is that thing? Is it a bomb?"

"A bomb, Erno? Are you crazy?" Tyler snapped one of the lines around a reinforcing strut. He donned a harness and handed an identical one to Erno. "Put this on."

"I'm afraid of heights."

"Don't be silly. This is safe as a kiss. Safer, maybe."

"What are we trying to accomplish?"

"That's something of a metaphysical question."

"That thing doesn't look metaphysical to me."

"Nonetheless, it is. Call it the Philosopher's Stone. We're going to attach it to the inside of the dome."

"I'm not going to blow any hole in the dome."

"Erno, I couldn't blow a hole in the dome without killing myself. I guarantee you that, as a result of what we do here, I will suffer whatever consequences anyone else suffers. More than anyone else, even. Do I look suicidal to you, Erno?"

"To tell the truth, I don't know. You sure do some risky things. Why don't you tell me what you intend?"

"This is a test. I want to see whether you trust me."

"You don't trust *me* enough to tell me anything."

"Trust isn't about being persuaded. Trust is when you do something because your brother asks you to. I didn't have to ask you along on this adventure, Erno. I trusted you." Tyler crouched there, calmly watching Erno. "So, do you have the balls for this?"

The moment stretched. Erno pulled on the climbing harness.

Tyler ran the ropes through the harness, gave him a pair of gloves, and showed Erno how to brake the rope behind his back. Then, with the maybe-bomb Philosopher's Stone slung over his shoulder, Tyler dropped through the port. Feeling like he was about to take a step he could never take back, Erno edged out after him.

Tyler helped him let out three or four meters of rope. Erno's weight made the rope twist, and the world began to spin dizzily. They were so close to the dome's inner surface that the "stars" shining there were huge fuzzy patches of light in the braided fiberglass surface. The farmlands of the crater floor were swathed in shadow, but around the crater's rim, oddly twisted from this god's-eye perspective, the lights of apartment districts cast fans of illumination on the hanging gardens and switchbacked perimeter road. Erno could make out a few microscopic figures down there. Not far from Tyler and him, the top of the central spire obscured their view to the west. The flying stage, thirty meters down from where the spire met the roof, was closed for the night, but an owl nesting underneath flew out at their appearance and circled below them.

Tyler began to swing himself back and forth at the end of his line, gradually picking up amplitude until, at the apex of one of his swings, he latched himself onto the dome's inner surface. "C'mon, Erno! Time's wasting!"

Erno steeled himself to copy Tyler's performance. It took effort to get himself swinging, and once he did the arcs were ponderous and slow. He had trouble orienting himself so that one end of his oscillation left him close to Tyler. At the top of every swing gravity disappeared and his stomach lurched. Finally, after what seemed an eternity of trying, Erno swung close enough for Tyler to reach out and snag his leg.

He pulled Erno up beside him and attached Erno's belt line to a ringbolt in the dome's surface. Erno's heart beat fast.

"Now you know you're alive," Tyler said.

"If anyone catches us up here, our asses are fried."

"Our asses are everywhere and always fried. That's the human condition. Let's work."

While Tyler pulled the device out of the bag he had Erno spread glue onto the dome's surface. When the glue was set, the two of them pressed the Philosopher's Stone into it until it was firmly fixed. Because of its reflective surface it would be invisible from the crater floor. "Now, what time did Debra Debrasdaughter say that meeting was tomorrow?"

"1600," Erno said. "You knew that."

Tyler flipped open the lid over the Stone's timer and punched some keys. "Yes, I did."

"And you didn't need my help to do this. Why did you make me come?"

The timer beeped; the digital readout began counting down. Tyler flipped the lid closed. "To give you the opportunity to betray me. And if you want to, you still have—" he looked at his wristward, "—fourteen hours and thirteen minutes."

Male Dominance Behavior

Erno had begun building his store of resentment when he was twelve, in Eva Evasdaughter's molecular biotechnology class. Eva Evasdaughter came from an illustrious family: her mother had been the longest serving member of the colony council. Her grandmother, Eva Kabatsumi, jailed with Nora Sobieski in California, had originated the matronymic system.

It took Erno a while to figure out that that didn't make Evasdaughter a good teacher. He was the brightest boy in the class. He believed in the cousins, respected authority, and worshipped women like his mother and Evasdaughter.

Evasdaughter was a tall woman who wore tight short-sleeved tunics that emphasized her small breasts. Erno had begun to notice such things; sex play was everyone's interest that semester, and he had recently had several erotic fondling sessions with girls in the class.

One day they were studying protein engineering. Erno loved it. He liked how you could make a gene jump through hoops if you were clever enough. He got ahead in the reading. That day he asked Eva Evasdaughter about directed protein mutagenesis, a topic they were not due to study until next semester.

"Can you make macro-modifications in proteins—I mean replace entire sequences to get new enzymes?" He was genuinely curious, but at some level he also was seeking Evasdaughter's approval of his doing extra work.

She turned on him coolly. "Are you talking about using site-directed mutagenesis, or chemical synthesis of oligonucleotides?"

He had never heard of site-directed mutagenesis. "I mean using oligonucleotides to change the genes."

"I can't answer unless I know if we're talking about site-directed or synthesized oligonucleotides. Which is it?"

Erno felt his face color. The other students were watching him. "I—I don't know."

"Yes, you don't," Evasdaughter said cheerfully. And instead of explaining, she turned back to the lesson.

Erno didn't remember another thing for the rest of that class, except looking at his shoes. Why had she treated him like that? She made him feel stupid. Yes, she knew more biotech than he did, but she was the teacher! Of course she knew more! Did that mean she had to put him down?

When he complained to his mother, she only said that he needed to listen to the teacher.

Only slowly did he realize that Evasdaughter had exhibited what he had always been taught was male dominance behavior. He had presented a challenge to her superiority, and she had smashed him flat. After he was smashed, she could afford to treat him kindly. But she would teach him only after he admitted that he was her inferior.

Now that his eyes were opened, he saw this behavior everywhere. Every day cousins asserted their superiority in order to hurt others. He had been lied to, and his elders were hypocrites.

Yet when he *tried to show his superiority, he was told to behave himself. Superior / inferior is wrong, they said. Difference is all.*

five

One thing Tyler had said was undoubtedly true: this was a test. How devoted was Erno to the Society of Cousins? How good a judge was he of Tyler's character? How eager was he to see his mother and the rest of his world made uncomfortable, and how large a discomfort did he think was justified? Just how angry was Erno?

After Erno got back to his room, he lay awake, unable to sleep. He ran every moment of his night with Tyler over in his mind, parsed every sentence, and examined every ambiguous word. Tyler had never denied that the Philosopher's Stone was a bomb. Erno looked up the term in the dictionary: a philosopher's stone was "an imaginary substance sought by alchemists in the belief that it would change base metals into gold or silver."

He did not think the change that Tyler's stone would bring had anything to do with gold or silver.

He looked at his palm, long since washed clean, where Alicia had written her number. She'd asked him to call her before he did anything stupid.

At 1545 the next day Erno was seated in the amphitheater among the crowds of cousins. More people were here than had come the previous week, and the buzz of their conversation, broken by occasional laughter, filled the air. He squinted up at the dome to try to figure out just where they had placed the stone. The dome had automatic safety devices to seal any minor air leak. But it couldn't survive a hole blasted in it. Against the artificial blue sky Erno watched a couple of flyers circling like hawks.

1552. Tyler arrived, trailing a gaggle of followers, mostly young men trying to look insolent. He'd showed up—what did that mean? Erno noted that this time, Tyler wore black. He seemed as calm as he had before, and he chatted easily with the others, then left them to take a seat on the stage.

At 1559 Debra Debrasdaughter took her place. Erno looked at his watch.

1600.

Nothing happened.

Was that the test? To see whether Erno would panic and fall for a ruse? He tried to catch Tyler's eye, but got nothing.

Debrasdaughter rapped for order. The ranks of cousinss began to quiet, to sit up straighter. Near silence had fallen, and Debrasdaughter began to speak.

"Our second meeting to discuss—"

A flash of light seared the air high above them, followed a second later by a concussion. Shouts, a few screams.

Erno looked up. A cloud of black smoke shot rapidly from a point against the blue. One flyer tumbled, trying to regain his balance; the other had dived a hundred meters seeking a landing place. People pointed and shouted. The blue sky flickered twice, went to white as the imaging system struggled, then recovered.

People boiled out of the amphitheater, headed for pressurized shelter. Erno could not see if the dome had been breached. The smoke, instead of dissipating, spread out in an arc, then flattened up against the dome. It formed tendrils, shapes. He stood there, frozen. It was not smoke at all, he realized, but smart paint.

The nanodevices spread the black paint onto the interior of the dome. The paint crawled and shaped itself, forming letters. The letters, like a message from God, made a huge sign on the inside of the clear blue sky:

"BANG! YOU'RE DEAD!"

"You're Dead!"

One of the other *Stories for Men* was about Harry Rodney and Little Bert, two petty criminals on an ocean liner that has struck an iceberg and is sinking, with not enough lifeboats for all the passengers. The patriarchal custom was that women and children had precedence for spaces in the boats. Harry gives up his space in a boat in favor of some girl. Bert strips a coat and scarf from an injured woman, steals her jewelry, abandons her below decks, and uses her clothes to sneak into a lifeboat.

As it happens, both men survive. But Harry is so disgusted by Bert's crime that he persuades him to run away and pretend he is dead. For years, whenever Bert contacts Harry, Harry tells him to stay away or else the police might discover him. Bert never returns home for fear of being found out.

six

In the panic and confusion, Tyler Durden disappeared. On his seat at the meeting lay a note: "I did it."

As a first step in responding to the threat to the colony, the Board of Matrons immediately called the question of ostracism, and by evening the population had voted: Tyler Durden was declared invisible.

As if that mattered. He could not be found.

seven

It took several days for the writing to be erased from the dome.

A manhunt did not turn up Tyler. Nerves were on edge. Rumors arose, circulated, were denied. Tyler Durden was still in the colony, in disguise. A cabal of followers was hiding him. No, he and his confederates had a secret outpost ten kilometers north of the colony. Durden was in the employ of the government of California. He had stockpiled weapons and was planning an attack. He had an atomic bomb.

At the gym entrance, AI's checked DNA prints, and Erno was conscious, as never before, of the cameras in every room. He wondered if any monitors had picked up his excursion with Tyler. Every moment he expected a summons on his wristward to come to the assembly offices.

When Erno entered the workout room, he found Tyrus and a number of others wearing white T-shirts that said, "BANG! YOU'RE DEAD!"

Erno took the unoccupied rowing machine next to Ty. Ty was talking to Sid on the other side of him.

A woman came across the room to use the machines. She was tightly muscled, and her dark hair was pulled back from her sweaty neck. As she approached, the young men went silent and turned to look at her. She hesitated. Erno saw something on her face he had rarely seen on a woman's face before: fear. The woman turned and left the gym.

None of the boys said anything. If the others had recognized what had just happened, they did not let it show.

Erno pulled on his machine. He felt the muscles in his legs knot. "Cool shirt," he said.

"Tyrus wants to be invisible, too," said Sid. Sid wasn't wearing one of the shirts.

"Eventually someone will check the vids of Tyler's performances, and see me there," said Ty between strokes. "I'm not ashamed to be Tyler's fan." At thirteen, Erno and Ty had been fumbling lovers, testing out their sexuality. Now Ty was a blunt overmuscled guy who laughed like a hyena. He didn't laugh now.

"It was a rush to judgment," one of the other boys said. "Tyler didn't harm a single cousin. It was free expression."

"He could just as easily have blown a hole in the dome," said Erno. "Do they need any more justification for force?"

Ty stopped rowing and turned toward Erno. Where he had sweated through the fabric, the "Bang!" on his shirt had turned blood red. "Maybe it will come to force. We do as much work, and we're second class citizens." He started rowing again, pulled furiously at the machine, fifty reps a minute, drawing quick breaths.

"That Durden has a pair, doesn't he?" Sid said. Sid was a popular studboy. His thick chestnut hair dipped below one eye. "You should have seen the look on Rebecca's face when that explosion went off."

"I hear, if they catch him, the council's not going to stop at invisibility," Erno said. "They'll kick him out."

"Invisibility won't slow Tyler down," Ty said. "Would you obey the decree?" he asked Sid.

"Me? I'm too beautiful to let myself get booted. If Tyler Durden likes masculinists so much, let him go to one of the other colonies, or to Earth. I'm getting laid too often."

Erno's gut tightened. "They will kick him out. My mother would vote for it in a second."

"Let 'em try," Ty grunted, still rowing.

"Is that why you're working out so much lately, Ty?" Sid said. "Planning to move to Earth?"

"No. I'm just planning to bust your ass."

"I suspect it's not busting you want to do to my ass."

"Yeah. Your ass has better uses."

"My mother says Tyler's broken the social contract," Erno said.

"Does your mother—" Ty said, still rowing, "—keep your balls under her pillow?"

Sid laughed.

Erno wanted to grab Ty and tell him, *I was there. I helped him do it!* But he said nothing. He pulled on the machine. His face burned.

After a minute Erno picked up his towel and went to the weight machine. No one paid him any attention. Twenty minutes later he hit the sauna. Sweating in the heat, sullen, resentful. He had *been* there, had taken a bigger risk than any of these fan-boys.

Coming out of the sauna he saw Sid heading for the sex rooms, where any woman who was interested could find a male partner who was willing. Erno considered posting himself to one of the rooms. But he wasn't a stud; he was just an anonymous minor male. He had no following. It would be humiliating to sit there waiting for someone, or worse, to be selected by some old bag.

A day later Erno got himself one of the T-shirts. Wearing it didn't make him feel any better.

It came to him that maybe this was the test Tyler intended: not whether

Erno would tell about the Philosopher's Stone before it happened, but whether he would admit he'd helped set it after he saw the uproar it caused in the colony.

If that was the test, Erno was failing. He thought about calling Tyler's apartment, but the constables were sure to be monitoring that number. A new rumor had it Tyler had been captured and was being held in protective custody—threats had been made against his life—until the Board of Matrons could decide when and how to impose the invisibility. Erno imagined Tyler in some bare white room, his brain injected with nanoprobes, his neck fitted with a collar.

At biotech, Erno became aware of something he had never noticed before: how the women assumed first pick of the desserts in the cafeteria. Then, later, when he walked by their table, four women burst into laughter. He turned and stared at them, but they never glanced at him.

Another day he was talking with a group of engineers on break: three women, another man, and Erno. Hana from materials told a joke: "What do you have when you have two little balls in your hand?"

The other women grinned. Erno watched the other man. He stood as if on a trapdoor, a tentative smile on his face. The man was getting ready to laugh, because that was what you did when people told jokes, whether or not they were funny. It was part of the social contract—somebody went into joke-telling mode, and you went into joke-listening mode.

"A man's undivided attention," Hana said.

The women laughed. The man grinned.

"How can you tell when a man is aroused?" Pearl said. "—He's breathing."

"That isn't funny," Erno said.

"Really? I think it is," Hana said.

"It's objectification. Men are just like women. They have emotions, too."

"Cool off, Erno," said Pearl. "This isn't gender equity class."

"There is no gender equity here."

"Someone get Erno a T-shirt."

"Erno wants to be invisible."

"We're already invisible!" Erno said, and stalked off. He left the lab, put on his suit, and took the next bus back to the dome. He quit going to his practicum: he would not let himself be used anymore. He was damned if he would go back there again.

A meeting to discuss what to do about the missing comedian was disrupted by a group of young men marching and chanting outside the meeting room. Constables were stationed in public places, carrying clubs. In online discussion rooms, people openly advocated closing the Men's Houses for fear conspiracies were being hatched in them.

And Erno received another message. This one was from "Harry Callahan."

> Are you watching, Erno? If you think our gender situation is GROSS, you can change it. Check exposition.

Crimes of Violence

The incidence of crimes of violence among the cousins is vanishingly small. Colony archives record eight murders in sixty years. Five of them were man against man, two man against woman, and one woman against woman.

This does not count vigilante acts of women against men, but despite the lack of official statistics, such incidents too are rare.

eight

"It's no trick to be celibate when you don't like sex."

"That's the point," Erno insisted. "He does like sex. He likes sex fine. But he's making a sacrifice in order to establish his point: He's not going to be a prisoner of his dick."

Erno was sitting out on the ledge of the terrace in front of their apartment, chucking pebbles at the recycling bin at the corner and arguing with his cousin Lena. He had been arguing with a lot of people lately, and not getting anywhere. Every morning he still left as if he were going to biotech, but instead he hung out in the park or gym. It would take some time for his mother to realize he had dropped out.

Lena launched into a tirade, and Erno was suddenly very tired of it all. Before she could gain any momentum, he threw a last pebble that whanged off the bin, got up and, without a word, retreated into the apartment. He could hear Lena's squawk behind him.

He went to his room and opened a screen on his wall. The latest news was that Tashi Yokiosson had regained consciousness, but that he had suffered neurological damage that might take a year or more to repair. Debate on the situation raged on the net. Erno opened his documents locker and fiddled with a melancholy sonnet he was working on, but he wasn't in the mood.

He switched back to Tyler's cryptic message. *You can change it. Check exposition.* It had something to do with biotech, Erno was pretty sure. He had tried the public databases, but had not come up with anything. There were databases accessible only through the biotech labs, but he would have to return to his practicum to view them, and that would mean he would have to explain his absence. He wasn't ready for that yet.

On impulse, Erno looked up Tyler in the colony's genome database. What was the name Debrasdaughter had called him?—Marysson, Thomas Marysson. He found Tyler's genome. Nothing about it stood out.

Debaters had linked Tyler's bio to the genome. Marysson had been born thirty-six years ago. His mother was a second-generation cousin; his grandmother had arrived with the third colonization contingent, in 2038. He had received a general education, neither excelling nor failing anything. His mother had died when he was twenty. He had moved out into the dorms, had worked uneventfully in construction and repair for fourteen years, showing no sign of rebelliousness before reinventing himself as Tyler Durden, the Comedian.

Until two years ago, absolutely nothing had distinguished him from any of a thousand male cousins.

Bored, Erno looked up his own genome.

There he lay in rows of base pairs, neat as a tile floor. Over at biotech, some insisted that everything you were was fixed in those sequences in black and white. Erno didn't buy it. Where was the gene for desire there, or hope, or despair, or frustration? Where was the gene that said he would sit in front of a computer screen at the age of seventeen, boiling with rage?

He called up his mother's genome. There were her sequences. Some were the same as his. Of course there was no information about his father. To prevent dire social consequences, his father must remain a blank spot in his history, as far as the Society of Cousins was concerned. Maybe some families kept track of such things, but nowhere in the databases were fathers and children linked.

Of course they couldn't stop him from finding out. He knew others who had done it. His father's genome was somewhere in the database, for medical purposes. If he removed from his own those sequences that belonged to his mother, then what was left—at least the sequences she had not altered when she had planned him—belonged to his father. He could cross check those against the genomes of all the colony's men.

From his chart, he stripped those genes that matched his mother's. Using what remained, he prepared a search engine to sort through the colony's males.

The result was a list of six names. Three were brothers: Stuart, Simon, and Josef Bettesson. He checked the available public information on them. They were all in their nineties, forty years older than Erno's mother. Of the remaining men, two were of about her age: Sidney Orindasson and Micah Avasson. Of those two, Mica Avasson had the higher correlation with Erno's genome.

He read the public records for Micah Avasson. Born in 2042, he would be fifty-six years old. A physical address: men's dormitory, East Five lava tube. He keyed it into his notebook.

Without knocking, his mother came into the room. Though he had no reason to be ashamed of his search, Erno shoved the notebook into his pocket.

She did not notice. "Erno, we need to talk."

"By talk do you mean interrogate, or lecture?"

His mother's face stiffened. For the first time he noticed the crow's feet at the corners of her eyes. She moved around his room, picking up his clothes, sorting, putting them away. "You should keep your room cleaner. Your room is a reflection of your mind."

"Please, mother."

She held one of his shirts to her nose, sniffed, and made a face. "Did I ever tell you about the time I got arrested? I was thirteen, and Derek Silviasson and I were screwing backstage in the middle of a performance of *A Doll's House*. We got a little carried away. When Nora opened the door to leave at the end of the second act, she tripped over Derek and me in our second act."

"They arrested you? Why?"

"The head of the Board was a prude. It wouldn't have mattered so much but *A Doll's House* was her favorite play."

"You and Derek Silviasson were lovers?"

She sat down on his bed, a meter from him, and leaned forward. "After the paint bombing, Erno, they went back to examine the recordings from the spex of the officers at the Oxygen Warehouse riot. Who do you suppose, to my surprise, they found there?"

Erno swiveled in his chair to avoid her eyes. "Nick already told you I went there."

"But you didn't. No only were you there, but at one point you were together with Durden."

"What was I doing?"

"Don't be difficult. I'm trying to protect you, Erno. The only reason I know about this is that Harald Gundasson let me know on the sly. Another report says Durden met you outside the North airlock one day. You're likely to be called in for questioning. I want to know what's going on. Are you involved in some conspiracy?"

His mother looked so forlorn he found it hard to be hostile. "As far as I know there is no conspiracy."

"Did you have something to do with the paint bomb?"

"No. Of course not."

"I found out you haven't been to your practicum. What have you been doing?"

"I've been going to the gym."

"Are you planning a trip to Earth?"

"Don't be stupid, mother."

"Honestly, Erno, I can't guess what you are thinking. You're acting like a spy."

"Maybe I am a spy."

His mother laughed.

"Don't laugh at me!"

"I'm not laughing because you're funny. I'm laughing because I'm scared! This is an ugly business, Erno."

"Stop it, mother. Please."

She stared at him. He tried not to look away. "I want you to listen. Tyler Durden is a destroyer. I've been to Aristarchus, to Tycho. I've seen the patriarchy. Do you want that here?"

"How would I know? I've never been there!" His eyes fell on the copy of *Stories for Men*. "Don't tell me stories about rape and carnage," he said, looking at the book's cover. "I've heard them all before. You crammed them down my throat with my baby food."

"They're true. Do you deny them?"

Erno clenched his jaw, tried to think. Did she have to browbeat him? "I don't know!"

"It's not just carnage. It's waste and insanity. You want to know what they're like—one time I had a talk with this security man at Shackleton. They were mining lunar ice for reaction mass in the shuttles.

"I put it to him that using lunar ice for rocket fuel was criminally wasteful. Water is the most precious commodity on the moon, and here they are blowing it into space.

"He told me it was cheaper to use lunar ice than haul water from Earth. My argument wasn't with him, he said, it was with the laws of the marketplace. Like most of them, he condescended to me, as if I were a child or idiot. He thought that invoking the free market settled the issue, as if to go against the market were to go against the laws of nature. The goal of conquering space justified the expenditure, he said—that they'd get more water somewhere else when they used up the lunar ice."

"He's got an argument."

"The market as a law of nature? 'Conquering space?' How do you conquer space? That's not a goal, it's a disease."

"What does this have to do with Tyler Durden?"

"Durden is bringing the disease here!"

"He's fighting oppression! Men have no power here; they are stifled and ignored. There are no real male cousins."

"There are plenty of male cousins. There are lots of role models. Think of Adil Al-Hafaz, of Peter Sarahsson—of Nick, for pity's sake!"

"Nick? Nick?" Erno laughed. He stood. "You might as well leave now, officer."

His mother looked hurt. "Officer?"

"That's why you're here, isn't it?"

"Erno, I know you don't like me. I'm dull and conventional. But being unconventional, by itself, isn't a virtue. I'm your mother."

"And you're a cop."

That stopped her for a moment. She took a deep breath. "I dearly love you, Erno, but if you think—"

That tone of voice. He'd heard it all his life: all the personal anecdotes are over, now. We're done with persuasion, and it's time for you to do what I say.

"You dearly love nothing!" Erno shouted. "All you want is to control me!"

She started to get up. "I've given you every chance—"

Erno threw *Stories for Men* at her. His mother flinched, and the book struck her in the chest and fell slowly to the floor. She looked more startled than hurt, watching the book fall, tumbling, leaves open; she looked as if she were trying to understand what it was—but when she faced him again, her eyes clouded. Trembling, livid, she stood, and started to speak. Before she could say a word Erno ran from the room.

Property

A man on his own is completely isolated. Other men might be his friends or lovers, but if he has a legal connection to anyone, it is to his mother.

Beyond a certain point, property among the cousins is the possession of the community. Private property passes down from woman to woman, but only outside of the second degree of blood relation. A woman never inherits from her biological mother. A woman chooses her friends and mates, and in the event of her death, her property goes to them. If a woman dies without naming an heir, her property goes to the community.

A man's property is typically confined to personal possessions. Of course, in most families he is petted, and has access to more resources than any female, but the possessions are gotten for him by his mother or his mate, and they belong to her. What property he might hold beyond that belongs to his mother. If he has no mother, then it belongs to his oldest sister. If he has no sister, then it goes to the community.

A man who forsakes his family has nowhere to go.

nine

The great jazzmen were all persecuted minorities. Black men like Armstrong, Ellington, Coltrane, Parker. And the comedians were all Jews and black men. Leaving his mother's apartment, Erno saw himself the latest in history's long story of abused fighters for expressive freedom.

Erno stalked around the perimeter road, head down. To his left, beyond the parapet, the crater's inner slope, planted with groundsel, wildflowers, and hardy low-G modifications of desert scrub, fell away down to the agricultural fields, the park, and two kilometers distant, clear through the low-moisture air, the aspen-forested opposite slopes. To his right rose the ranks of apartments, refectories, dorms, public buildings and labs, clusters of oblong boxes growing higgledy-piggledy, planted with vines and hanging gardens, divided by ramps and stairs and walkways, a high-tech cliff city in pastel concrete glittering with ilemenite crystals. A small green lizard scuttled across the pebbled composite of the roadway and disappeared among some ground cover.

Erno ignored the people on their way to work and back, talking or playing. He felt like smashing something. But smashing things was not appropriate cousins behavior.

In the southwest quad he turned up a ramp into a residential district. These were newer structures, products of the last decade's planned expansion of living quarters, occupied for the most part by new families. He moved upward by steady leaps, feeling the tension on his legs, enjoying the burn it generated.

Near the top of the rimwall he found Gilman 334. He pressed the door button. The screen remained blank, but after a moment Alicia's voice came from the speaker. "Erno. Come on in."

The door opened and he entered the apartment. It consisted mostly of an open lounge, furnished in woven furniture, with a couple of small rooms adjoining. Six young women were sitting around inhaling mood enhancers, listening to music. The music was Monk, "Brilliant Corners." Erno had given it to Alicia; she would never have encountered twentieth century jazz otherwise.

There was something wrong with Monk in this context. These girls ought to be listening to some lunar music—one of the airy mixed choral groups, or Shari Cloudsdaughter's *Drums and Sunlight*. In this circle of females, the tossed off lines of Sonny Rollins' sax, the splayed rhythms of Monk's piano, seemed as if they were being stolen. Or worse still, studied—by a crew of aliens for whom they could not mean what they meant to Erno.

"Hello," Erno said. "Am I crashing your party?"

"You're not crashing." Alicia took him by the arm. "This is Erno," she said to the others. "Some of you know him."

Sharon was there, one of the hottest women in Alicia's cohort at school—he had heard Sid talk about her. He recognized Betty Sarahsdaughter, Liz Bethsdaughter, both of them, like Alicia, studying social work, both of whom had turned him down at one time or another. Erno liked women as individuals, but in a group, their intimate laughter, gossip, and private jokes—as completely innocent as they might be—made him feel like he knew nothing about them. He drew Alicia aside, "Can we talk—in private?"

"Sure." She took Erno to one of the bedrooms. She sat on the bed, gestured to a chair. "What's the matter?"

"I had a fight with my mother."

"That's what mothers are for, as far as I can tell."

"And the constables are going to call me in for questioning. They think I may be involved in some conspiracy with Tyler Durden."

"Do you know where he is?"

Erno's defenses came up. "Do you care?"

"I don't want to know where he is. If you know, keep it to yourself. I'm *not* your mother."

"I could be in trouble."

"A lot of us will stand behind you on this, Erno. Sharon and I would." She reached out to touch his arm. "I'll go down to the center with you."

Erno moved to the bed beside her. He slid his hand to her waist, closed his eyes, and rubbed his cheek against her hair. To his surprise, he felt her hand between his shoulder blades. He kissed her, and she leaned back. He looked into her face: her green eyes, troubled, searched his. Her bottom lip was full.

He kissed her again, slid his hand to her breast, and felt the nipple taut beneath her shirt.

Leave aside the clumsiness—struggling out of their clothes, the distraction of "Straight, No Chaser" from the other room, Erno's momentary thought of the women out there wondering what was going on in here—and it was the easiest thing in the world. He slid into Alicia as if he were coming home. Though his head swirled with desire, he tried to hold himself back, to give her what she wanted. He kissed her all over. She giggled and teased him and twisted her fingers in his hair to pull him down to her, biting his lip. For fifteen or twenty minutes, the Society of Cousins disappeared.

Erno watched her face, watched her closed eyes and parted lips, as she concentrated on her pleasure. It gave him a feeling of power. Her skin flushed, she gasped, shuddered, and he came.

He rested his head upon her breast, eyes closed, breathing deeply, tasting the salt of her sweat. Her chest rose and fell, and he could hear her heart beating fast, then slower. He held her tight. Neither said anything for a long time.

After a while he asked her, quietly, "Can I stay here?"

Alicia stroked his shoulder, slid out from beneath him, and began to pull on her shirt. "I'll talk to Sharon."

Sharon. Erno wondered how many of the other women in the next room Alicia was sleeping with. Alicia was a part of that whole scene, young men and women playing complex mating games that Erno was no good at. He had no idea what "talking to Sharon" might involve. But Alicia acted as if the thought of him moving in was a complete surprise.

"Don't pull a muscle or anything stretching to grasp the concept," Erno said softly.

Alicia reacted immediately. "Erno, we've never exchanged two words about partnering. What do you expect me to say?"

"We did talk about it—in the park. You said you would talk to Sharon then. Why didn't you?"

"Please, Erno." She drew up her pants and the fabric seamed itself closed over her lovely, long legs. "When you're quiet, you're so sweet."

Sweet. Erno felt vulnerable, lying there naked with the semen drying on his belly. He reached for his clothes. "That's right," he muttered, "I forgot. Sex is the social glue. Fuck him so he doesn't cause any trouble."

"Everything isn't about your penis, Erno. Durden is turning you into some self-destructive *boy*. Grow up."

"Grow up?" Erno tugged on his pants. "You don't want me grown up. You want the sweet boy, forever. I've figured it out now—you're never even there with me, except maybe your body. At least I think it was you."

Alicia stared at him. Erno recognized that complete exasperation: he had seen it on his mother. From the next room drifted the sound of "Blue Monk," and women laughing.

"Sharon was right," Alicia said, shaking her head. And she chuckled, a little rueful gasp, as if to say, *I can't believe I'm talking with this guy*.

Erno took a step forward and slapped her face. "You bitch," he breathed. "You fucking bitch."

Alicia fell back, her eyes wide with shock. Erno's head spun. He fled the room, ran through the party and out of the apartment.

It was full night now, the dome sprinkled with stars. He stalked down the switchback ramps toward the perimeter road, through the light thrown by successive lampposts, in a straight-legged gait that kicked him off the pavement with every stride. He hoped that anyone who saw him would see his fury and think him dangerous. Down on the road he stood at the parapet, breathing through his mouth and listening to the hum of insects in the fields below.

In the lamplight far to his left, a person in a green uniform appeared. On impulse Erno hopped over the parapet to the slope. Rather than wait for the constable to pass, he bounced off down toward the crater's floor, skidding where it was steep, his shoes kicking up dust. He picked up speed, making headlong four- or five-meter leaps, risking a fall every time his feet touched.

It was too fast. Thirty meters above the floor he stumbled and went flying face forward. He came down sideways, rolled, and slammed his head as he flipped and skidded to a halt. He lay trying to catch his breath. He felt for broken limbs. His shirt was torn and his shoulder ached. He pulled himself up and went down the last few meters to the crater floor, then limped through the fields for Sobieski Park.

In a few minutes he was there, out of breath and sweating. At the fountain he splashed water on his face. He felt his shoulder gingerly, then made his way to the amphitheater. At first he thought the theater was deserted, but then he saw, down on the stage, a couple of women necking, oblivious of him.

He stood in the row where he had spotted Alicia some weeks before. He had hit her. He couldn't believe he had hit her.

ten

Erno slept in the park and in the morning headed for his biotech shift as if he had never stopped going. No one at the airlock questioned him. Apparently, even though his mind was chaos, he looked perfectly normal. The radiation warning had been renewed; solar monitors reported conditions ripe for a coronal mass ejection. Cousins obliged to go out on the surface were being advised to keep within range of a radiation shelter.

When Erno arrived at the bunker he went to Lemmy Odilleson's lab. Lemmy had not arrived yet. He sat down at his workstation, signed onto the system, pressed his thumb against the gene scanner and accessed the database.

He tried the general index. There was no file named exposition. Following Tyler's reference to "gross," he looked for any references to the number 144. Nothing. Nothing on the gross structures of nucleotides, either. He tried coming at it from the virus index. Dozens of viruses had been engineered by the cousins to deal with problems from soil microbes to cellular breakdowns caused by exposure to surface radiation. There was no virus called exposition.

While he sat there Lemmy showed up. He said nothing of Erno's sudden appearance after his extended absence. "We're making progress on integrating the morphological growth genes into the prototypes," he said excitedly. "The sequences for extracting silicon from the soil are falling into place."

"That's good," Erno said. He busied himself cleaning up the chaos Lemmy typically left in his notes. After a while, he asked casually, "Lemmy, have you ever heard about a virus called 'exposition'?"

"X-position?" Lemmy said vaguely, not looking up from a rack of test bulbs. "Those prefixes go with female sex-linked factors. The Y-position are the male."

"Oh, right."

As soon as Erno was sure Lemmy was caught up in his lab work, he turned back to the archives. First he went to Gendersites, a database he knew mostly for its concentration of anti-cancer modifications. X-position led him to an encyclopedia of information on the X chromosome. Erno called up a number of files, but he saw no point in digging through gene libraries at random. He located a file of experiments on female-linked syndromes from osteoporosis to post menopausal cardiac conditions.

On a whim, he did a search on "gross."

Up popped a file labeled Nucleotide Repeats. When Erno opened the file, the heading read:

Get
Rid
Of
Slimy
girl**S**

The sounds of the lab around him faded as he read the paper.

It described a method for increasing the number of unstable trinucleotide repeats on the X chromosome. All humans had repeat sequences, the presence of which were associated with various diseases: spinal and bulbar muscular atrophy, fragile X mental retardation, myotonic dystrophy, Huntington disease, spinocerebrellar ataxia, dentatorubral-pallidoluysian atrophy, and Machado-Joseph disease. All well understood neurological disorders.

In normal DNA, the repeats were below the level of expression of disease. Standard tests of the zygote assured this. The GROSS paper told how to construct two viruses: the first would plant a time bomb in the egg. At a particular stage of embryonic development the repetition of trinucleotides would explode. The second virus would plant compensating sequences on the Y chromosome.

Creating the viruses would be a tricky but not impossible problem in plasmid engineering. Their effect, however, would be devastating. In males the Y chromosome would suppress the X-linked diseases, but in females the trinucleotide syndromes would be expressed. When the repeats kicked in, the child would develop any one of a host of debilitating or fatal neurological disorders.

Of course once the disorder was recognized, other gene engineers would go to work curing it, or at least identifying possessors pre-natally. The GROSS virus would not destroy the human race—but it could burden a generation of females with disease and early death.

Tyler had led Erno to this monstrosity. What was he supposed to do with it?

Nonetheless, Erno downloaded the file into his notebook. He had just finished when Cluny came into the lab.

"Hello, Professor Odillesson," Cluny said to Lemmy. He saw Erno and did a double take. Erno stared back at him.

"I'm not a professor, Michael," Lemmy said.

Cluny pointed at Erno. "You know the constables are looking for him?"

"They are? Why?"

Erno got up. "Don't bother explaining. I'll go."

Cluny moved to stop him. "Wait a minute."

Erno put his hand on Cluny's shoulder to push him aside. Cluny grabbed Erno's arm.

"What's going on?" Lemmy asked.

Erno tried to free himself from Cluny, but the Earthman's grip was firm. Cluny pulled him, and pain shot through the shoulder Erno had hurt in yesterday's spill. Erno hit Cluny in the face.

Cluny's head jerked back, but he didn't let go. His jaw clenched and his expression hardened into animal determination. He wrestled with Erno; they lost their balance, and in slow motion stumbled against a lab bench. Lemmy shouted and two women ran in from the next lab. Before Erno knew it he was pinned against the floor.

"Dead Man"

Many of the stories for men were about murder. The old Earth writers seemed fascinated by murder, and wrote about it from a dozen perspectives.

In one of the stories, a detective whose job it is to throw illegal riders off cargo trains finds a destitute man—a "hobo"—hiding on the train. While being brutally beaten by the detective, the hobo strikes back and unintentionally kills him.

The punishment for such a killing, even an accidental one, is death. Terrified, knowing that he has to hide his guilt, the hobo hurries back to the city. He pretends he never left the "flophouse" where he spent the previous night. He disposes of his clothes, dirty with coal dust from the train.

Then he reads a newspaper report. The detective's body has been found, but the investigators assume that he fell off the train and was killed by accident, and are not seeking anyone. The hobo is completely free from suspicion. His immediate reaction is to go to the nearest police station and confess.

eleven

Erno waited in a small white room at the constabulary headquarters. As a child Erno had come here many times with his mother, but now everything seemed different. He was subject to the force of the state. That fucking cow Cluny. The constables had taken his notebook. Was that *pro forma,* or would they search it until they found the GROSS file?

He wondered what Alicia had done after he'd left the day before. What had she told her friends?

The door opened and two women came in. One of them was tall and good-looking. The other was small, with a narrow face and close cropped blond hair. She looked to be a little younger than his mother. She sat down across from him; the tall woman remained standing.

"This can be simple, Erno, if you let it," the small woman said. She had an odd drawl that, combined with her short stature, made Erno wonder if she was from Earth. "Tell us where Tyler Durden is. And about the conspiracy."

Erno folded his arms across his chest. "I don't know where he is. There is no conspiracy."

"Do we have to show you images of you and him together during the Oxygen Warehouse riot?"

"I never saw him before that, or since. We were just hiding in the back room."

"You had nothing to do with the smartpaint explosion?"

"No."

The tall woman, who still had not spoken, looked worried. The blond interrogator leaned forward, resting her forearms on the table. "Your DNA was found at the access portal where the device was set."

Erno squirmed. He imagined a sequence of unstable nucleotide triplets multiplying in the woman's cells. "He asked me to help him. I had no idea what it was."

"No idea. So it could have been a bomb big enough to blow a hole in the dome. Yet you told no one about it."

"I knew he wasn't going to kill anyone. I could tell."

The interrogator leaned back. "I hope you will excuse the rest of us if we question your judgment."

"Believe me, I would never do anything to hurt a cousin. Ask my mother."

The tall woman finally spoke. "We have. She does say that. But you have to help us out, Erno. I'm sure you can understand how upset all this has made the polity."

"Forget it, Kim," the other said. "Erno here's not going to betray his lover."

"Tyler's not my lover," Erno said.

The blond interrogator smirked. "Right."

The tall one said, "There's nothing wrong with you being lovers, Erno."

"They why did this one bring it up?"

"No special reason," said the blond. "I'm just saying you wouldn't betray him."

"Well, we're not lovers."

"Too bad," the blond muttered.

"You need to help us, Erno," the tall one said. "Otherwise, even if we let you go, you're going to be at risk of violence from other cousins."

"Only if you tell everyone about me."

"So we should just let you go, and not inconvenience you by telling others the truth about you," said the blond.

"What truth? You don't know me."

She came out of her chair, leaning forward on her clenched fists. Her face was flushed. "Don't know you? I know all about you."

"Mona, calm down," the other woman said.

"Calm down? Earth history is full of this! Men sublimate their sexual attraction in claims of brotherhood—with the accompanying military fetishism, penis comparing, suicidal conquer-or-die movements. Durden is heading for one of those classic orgasmic armageddons: Masada, Hitler in the bunker, David Koresh, September 11, the California massacre."

The tall one grabbed her shoulder and tried to pull her back. "Mona."

Mona threw off the restraining hand, and pushed her face up close to Erno's. "If we let this little shit go, I guarantee you he'll be involved in some transcendent destructive act—suicidally brave, suicidally cowardly—aimed at all of us. The signs are all over him." Spittle flew in Erno's face.

"You're crazy," Erno said. "If I wanted to fuck him, I would just fuck him."

The tall one tried again. "Come away, officer."

Mona grabbed Erno by the neck. "Where is he!"

"Come away, now!" The tall cop yanked the small woman away, and she fell back. She glared at Erno. The other, tugging her by the arm, pulled her out of the room.

Erno tried to catch his breath. He wiped his sleeve across his sweating face. He sat there alone for a long time, touching the raw skin where she had gripped his neck. Then the door opened and his mother came in.

"Mom!"

She carried some things in her hands, put them on the table. It was the contents of his pockets, including his notebook. "Get up."

"What's going on?"

"Just shut up and come with me. We're letting you go."

Erno stumbled from the chair. "That officer is crazy."

"Never mind her. I'm not sure she isn't right. It's up to you to prove she isn't."

She hustled him out of the office and into the hall. In seconds Erno found himself, dizzy, in the plaza outside the headquarters. "You are not out of trouble. Go home, and stay there," his mother said, and hurried back inside.

Passersby in North Six watched him as he straightened his clothes. He went to sit on the bench beneath the acacia trees at the lava tube's center. He caught his breath.

Erno wondered if the cop would follow through with her threat to tell about his helping with the explosion. He felt newly vulnerable. But it was not just vulnerability he felt. He had never seen a woman lose it as clearly as the interrogator had. He had gotten to her in a way he had never gotten to a matron in his life. She was actually *scared* of him!

Now what? He put his hand in his pocket, and felt the notebook.

He pulled it out. He switched it on. The GROSS file was still there, and so was the address he'd written earlier.

A Dream

Erno was ten when his youngest sister Celeste was born. After the birth, his mother fell into a severe depression. She snapped at Erno, fought with Aunt Sophie, and complained about one of the husbands until he moved out. Erno's way of coping was to disappear; his cousin Aphra coped by misbehaving.

One day Erno came back from school to find a fire in the middle of the kitchen floor, a flurry of safetybots stifling it with foam, his mother screaming, and Aphra—who had apparently started the fire—shouting back at her. Skidding on the foam, Erno stepped between the two of them, put his hands on Aphra's chest, and made her go to her room.

The whole time, his mother never stopped shouting. Erno was angrier at her than at Aphra. She was supposed to be the responsible one. When he returned from quieting Aphra, his mother ran off to her room and slammed the door. Erno cleaned the kitchen and waited for Aunt Sophie to come home.

The night of the fire he had a dream. He was alone in the kitchen, and then a man was there. The man drew him aside. Erno was unable to make out his face. "I am your father," the man said. "Let me show you something." He made Erno sit down and called up an image on the table. It was Erno's mother as a little girl. She sat, cross-legged, hunched over some blocks, her face screwed up in troubled introspection. "That's her second phase of work expression," Erno's father said.

With a shock, Erno recognized the expression on the little girl's face as one he had seen his mother make as she concentrated.

"She hates this photo," Erno's father said, as if to persuade Erno not to judge her: she still contained that innocence, that desire to struggle against a problem she could not solve. But Erno was mad. As he resisted, the father pressed on, and began to lose it too. He ended up screaming at Erno, "You can't take it? I'll make you see! I'll make you see!"

Erno put his hands over his ears. The faceless man's voice was twisted with rage. Eventually he stopped shouting. "There you go, there you go," he said quietly, stroking Erno's hair. "You're just the same."

twelve

On his way to the East Five tube, Erno considered the officer's rant. Maybe Tyler did want to sleep with him. So what? The officer was some kind of homophobe and ought to be relieved. Raving about violence while locking him up in a room. And then trying to choke him. Yes, he had the GROSS file in his pocket, yes he had hit Alicia—but he was no terrorist. The accusation was just a way for the cop to ignore men's legitimate grievances.

But they must not have checked the file, or understood it if they did. If they knew about GROSS, he would never have been freed.

Early in the colony's life, the East Five lava tube had been its major agricultural center. The yeast vats now produced only animal fodder, but the hydroponics rack farms still functioned, mostly for luxury items. The rote work of tending the racks fell to cousins who did not express ambition to do anything more challenging. They lived in the tube warrens on the colony's Minimum Living Standard.

A stylized painting of a centaur graced the entrance of the East Five men's warren. Since the artist had not likely ever studied a real horse, the stance of the creature looked deeply suspect to Erno. At the lobby interface Erno called up the AI attendant. The AI came onscreen as a dark brown woman wearing a glittery green shirt.

"I'm looking for Micah Avasson," Erno asked it.

"Who is calling?"

"Erno Pamelasson."

"He's on shift right now."

"Can I speak with him?"

"Knock yourself out." The avatar pointed off screen toward a dimly lit passageway across the room. She appeared on the wall near the doorway, and called out to Erno, "Over here. Follow this corridor, third exit left to the Ag tube."

Outside of the lobby, the corridors and rooms here had the brutal utilitarian quality that marked the early colony, when survival had been the first concern and the idea of humane design had been to put a mirror at the end of a room to try to convince the eye that you weren't living in a cramped burrow some meters below the surface of a dead world. An environmental social worker would shudder.

The third exit on the left was covered with a clear permeable barrier. From the time he was a boy Erno had disliked passing through these permeable barriers; he hated the feel of the electrostatics brushing his face. He took a mask from the dispenser, fitted it over his nose and mouth, closed his eyes and passed through into the Ag tube. Above, layers of gray mastic sealed the tube roof; below, a concrete floor supported long rows of racks under light transmitted fiberoptically from the heliostats. A number of workers wearing coveralls and oxygen masks moved up and down the rows tending the racks. The high CO_2 air was laden with humidity, and even through the mask smelled of phosphates.

Erno approached a man bent over a drawer of seedlings he had pulled out of a rack. The man held a meter from which wires dangled to a tube immersed in the hydroponics fluid. “Excuse me,” Erno said. “I'm looking for Micah Avasson.”

The man lifted his head, inspected Erno, then without speaking turned. “Micah!” He called down the row.

A tall man a little farther down the aisle looked up and peered at them. He had a full head of dark hair, a birdlike way of holding his shoulders. After a moment he said, “I'm Micah Avasson.”

Erno walked down toward him. Erno was nonplused—the man had pushed up his mask from his mouth and was smoking a cigarette, using real fire. No, not a cigarette—a joint.

“You can smoke in here? What about the fire regulations?”

“We in the depths are not held to as high a standard as you.” Micah said this absolutely deadpan, as if there were not a hint of a joke. “Not enough O_2 to make a decent fire anyway. It takes practice just to get a good buzz off this thing in here without passing out.”

Joint dangling from his lower lip, the man turned back to the rack. He wore yellow rubber gloves, and was pinching the buds off the tray of squat green leafy plants. Erno recognized them as a modified broadleaf sensamilla.

“You're using the colony facilities to grow pot.”

“This is my personal crop. We each get a personal rack. Sparks initiative.” Micah kept pinching buds. “Want to try some?”

Erno gathered himself. “My name is Erno Pamelasson. I came to see you because—”

“You're my son.” Micah said, not looking at him.

Erno stared, at a loss for words. Up close the lines at the corners of the man's eyes were distinct, and there was a bit of sag to his chin. But the shape of Micah's face reminded Erno of his own reflection in the mirror.

“What did you want to see me about?” Micah pushed the rack drawer closed and looked at Erno. When Erno stood there dumb, he wheeled the stainless steel cart beside him down to the next rack. He took a plastic bin from the cart, crouched, pulled open the bottom drawer of the rack and began harvesting cherry tomatoes.

Finally, words came to Erno. “Why haven't I ever seen you before?”

“Lots of boys never meet their fathers.”

“I'm not talking about other fathers. Why aren't you and my mother together?”

“You assume we were together. How do you know that we didn't meet in the sauna some night, one time only?”

“Is that how it was?”

Micah lifted a partially yellow tomato on his fingertips, then left it on the vine to ripen. He smiled. “No. Your mother and I were in love. We lived together for twenty-two months. And two days.”

“So why did you split?”

“That I don't remember so well. We must have had our reasons. Everybody has reasons.”

Erno touched his shoulder. "Don't give me that."

Micah stood, overbalancing a little. Erno caught his arm to steady him. "Thanks," Micah said. "The knees aren't what they used to be." He took a long drag on the joint, exhaled at the roof far overhead. "All right, then. The reason we broke up is that your mother is a cast-iron bitch. And I am a cast-iron bastard. The details of our breakup all derive from those simple facts, and I don't recall them. I do recall that we had good fun making you, though. I remember that well."

"I bet."

"You were a good baby, as babies go. Didn't cry too much. You had a sunny disposition." He took a final toke on the joint, and then dropped the butt into the bin of tomatoes. "Doesn't seem to have lasted."

"Were you there when I was born?"

"So we're going to have this conversation." Micah exhaled the last cloud of smoke, slipped his mask down, and finally fixed his watery brown eyes on Erno. "I was there. I was there until you were maybe six or seven months. Then I left."

"Did she make you leave?"

"Not really." His voice was muffled now. "She was taken with me at first because of the glamor—I was an acrobat, the *Cirque Jacinthe*? But her sister was in the marriage, and her friends. She had her mentor, her support group. I was just the father. It was okay while it was fun, and maybe I thought it was something more when we first got together, but after a while it wasn't fun anymore."

"You just didn't want the responsibility!"

"Erno, to tell you the truth, that didn't have much to do with it. I liked holding you on my lap and rubbing you with my beard. You would giggle. I would toss you up into the air and catch you. You liked that. Drove your mother crazy—you're going to hurt him, she kept saying."

Erno had a sudden memory of being thrown high, floating, tumbling. Laughing.

"So why did you leave?"

"Pam and I just didn't get along. I met another woman, that got hot, and Pam didn't seem to need me around anymore. I had filled my purpose."

Emotion worked in Erno. He shifted from foot to foot. "I don't understand men like you. They've stuck you down here in a dorm! You're old, and you've got nothing."

"I've got everything I need. I have friends."

"Women shit on you, and you don't care."

"There are women just like me. We have what we want. I work. I read. I grow my plants. I have no desire to change the world. The world works for me.

"The genius of the founders, Erno—" Micah opened another drawer and started on the next rack of tomatoes, "—was that they minimized the contact of males and females. They made it purely voluntary. Do you realize how many centuries men and women tore themselves to pieces through forced intimacy? In every marriage, the decades of lying that paid for every week of pleasure? That the vast majority of men and women, when they spoke honestly, regretted the day they had ever married?"

"We have no power!"

Micah made a disgusted noise. "Nobody has any power. On Earth, for every privilege, men had six obligations. I'm sorry you feel that something has been taken from you. If you feel that way, I suggest you work on building your own relationships. Get married, for pity's sake. Nothing is stopping you."

Erno grabbed Micah's wrist. "Look at me!"

Micah looked. "Yes?"

"You knew I was your son. Doesn't that mean you've been paying attention to me?"

"From a distance. I wish you well, you understand."

"You know I was responsible for the explosion at the meeting! The constables arrested me!"

"No. Really? That sounds like trouble, Erno."

"Don't you want to ask me anything?"

"Give me your number. If I think of something, I'll call. Assuming you're not banished by then."

Erno turned away. He stalked down the row of hydroponics.

"Come by again, Erno!" Micah called after him. "Anytime. I mean it. Do you like music?"

The next man down was watching Erno now. He passed through the door out of the Ag tube, tore off the mask and threw it down.

Some of the permeable barrier must have brushed Erno's face when he passed through, because as he left East Five he found he couldn't keep his eyes from tearing up.

"The Grandstand Complex"

Two motorcycle racers have been rivals for a long time. The one telling the story has been beating the other, Tony Lukatovich, in every race. Tony takes increasing risks to win the crowd's approval, without success. Finally he makes a bet with the narrator: whoever wins the next race, the loser will kill himself.

The narrator thinks Tony is crazy. He doesn't want to bet. But when Tony threatens to tell the public he is a coward, he agrees.

In the next race, Tony and another rider are ahead of the narrator until the last turn, where Tony's bike bumps the leader's and they both crash. The narrator wins, but Tony is killed in the crash.

Then the narrator finds out that, *before the race*, Tony told a newspaper reporter that the narrator had decided to retire after the next fatal crash. Did Tony deliberately get himself killed in order to make him retire?

Yet, despite the news report, the winner doesn't have to retire. He can say he changed his mind. Tony hasn't won anything, has he? If so, what?

thirteen

Erno had not left the apartment in days. In the aftermath of his police interview, his mother had hovered over him like a bad mood, and it was all he could do to avoid her reproachful stare. Aunt Sophie and Lena and even Aphra acted like he had some terminal disease that might be catching. They intended to heap him with shame until he was crushed. He holed up in his room listening to an ancient recording, "Black and Blue," by Louis Armstrong. The long dead jazzman growled, "What did I do, to feel so black and blue?"

A real man would get back at them. Tyler would. And they would know that they were being gotten, and they would be gotten in the heart of their assumption of superiority. Something that would show women permanently that men were not to be disregarded.

Erno opened his notebook and tried writing a poem.

When you hit someone
It changes their face.

Your mother looks shocked and old.
Alicia looks younger.
Men named Cluny get even stupider than they are.

It hurts your fist.
It hurts your shoulder.

The biggest surprise: you can do it.
Your fist is there at the end of your arm
Waiting
At any and every moment
Whether you are aware of it or not.

Once you know this
The world changes.

He stared at the lines for some minutes, then erased them. In their place he tried writing a joke.

Q: How many matrons does it take to screw in a light bulb?
A: Light bulbs don't care to be screwed by matrons.

He turned off his screen and lay on his bed, his hands behind his head, and stared at the ceiling. He could engineer the GROSS virus. He would not even need access to the biotech facilities; he knew where he could obtain almost everything required from warehouses within the colony. But he would need a place secret enough that nobody would find him out.

Suddenly he knew the place. And with it, he knew where Tyler was hiding.

The northwest lava tube was fairly busy when Erno arrived at 2300. Swing shift cousins wandered into the open clubs, and the free enterprise shops were doing their heaviest business. The door to the Oxygen Warehouse was dark, and a public notice was posted on it. The door was locked, and Erno did not want to draw attention by trying to force it.

So he returned to the construction materials warehouse in North Six. Little traffic here, and Erno was able to slip inside without notice. He kept behind the farthest aisle until he reached the back wall and the deserted airlock that was being used for storage. It took him some minutes to move the building struts and slide through to the other end. The door opened and he was in the deserted lava tube.

It was completely dark. He used his flashlight to retrace their steps from weeks ago.

Before long, Erno heard a faint noise ahead. He extinguished the flash and saw, beyond several bends in the distance, a faint light. He crept along until he reached a section where light fell from a series of open doorways. He slid next to the first and listened.

The voices from inside stopped. After a moment one of them called, "Come in."

Nervous, Erno stepped into the light from the open door. He squinted and saw Tyler and a couple of other men in a room cluttered with tables, cases of dried food, oxygen packs, scattered clothes, blankets, surface suits. On the table were book readers, half-filled juice bulbs, constables' batons.

One of the younger men came up to Erno and slapped him on the back. "Erno. My man!" It was Sid.

The others watched Erno speculatively. Tyler leaned back against the table. He wore a surface skintight; beside him lay his utility belt. His hair had grown out into a centimeter of red bristle. He grinned. "I assume you've brought the goods, Erno."

Erno pulled his notebook from his pocket. "Yes."

Tyler took the notebook and, without moving his eyes from Erno's, put it on the table. "You can do this, right?"

"Erno's a wizard," Sid said. "He can do it in his sleep."

The other young men just watched Erno. They cared what he was going to say.

"I can do it."

Tyler scratched the corner of his nose with his index finger. "Will you?"

"I don't know."

"Why don't you know? Is this a hard decision?"

"Of course it is. A lot of children will die. Nothing will ever be the same."

"We're under the impression that's the point, Erno. Come with me," Tyler said, getting off the table. "We need to talk."

Tyler directed the others to go back to work and took Erno into another room. This one had a cot, a pile of clothes, and bulbs of alcohol lying around. On a wall screen was a schematic of the colony's substructure.

Tyler pushed a pile of clothes off a chair. "Sit down."

Erno sat. "You knew about this place before we came here the night of the riot."

Tyler said nothing.

"They asked me if there was a conspiracy," Erno continued. "I told them no. Is there?"

"Sure there is. You're part of it."

"I'm not part of anything."

"That's the trouble with men among the cousins, Erno. We're not part of anything. If a man isn't part of something, then he's of no use to anybody."

"Help me out, Tyler. I don't get it."

"They say that men can't live only with other men. I don't believe that. Did you ever study the warrior culture?"

"No."

"Men banding together—for duty, honor, clan. That's what the warrior lived by throughout history. It was the definition of manhood.

"The matrons say men are extreme, that they'll do anything. They're right. A man will run into a collapsing building to rescue a complete stranger. That's why, for most of human history, the warrior was necessary for the survival of the clan—later the nation.

"But the twentieth century drained all the meaning out of it. First the great industrial nations exploited the warrior ethic, destroying the best of their sons for money, for material gain, for political ideology. Then the feminist movement, which did not understand the warrior, and feared and ridiculed him, grew. They even persuaded some men to reject masculinity.

"All this eventually erased the purpose from what was left of the warrior culture. Now, if the warrior ethic can exist at all, it must be personal. 'Duty, honor, self.' "

"Self?"

"Self. In some way it was always like that. Sacrifice for others is not about the others, it's the ultimate assertion of self. It's the self, after all, that decides to place value in the other. What's important is the *self* and the *sacrifice,* not the cause for which you sacrifice. In the final analysis, all sacrifices are in service of the self. The pure male assertion."

"You're not talking about running into a collapsing building, Tyler."

Tyler laughed. "Don't you get it yet, Erno? We're living in a collapsing building!"

"If we produce this virus, people are going to die."

"Living as a male among the cousins is death. They destroy certain things, things that are good—only this society defines them as bad. Fatherhood. Protection of the weak by the strong. There's no *force* here, Erno. There's no *growth*. The cousins are an evolutionary dead end. In time of peace it may look fine and dandy, but in time of war, it would be wiped out in a moment."

Erno didn't know what to say.

"This isn't some scheme for power, Erno. You think I'm in this out of some abstract theory? This is life's blood. This—"

Sid ran in from the hall. "Tyler," he said. "The warehouse door has cycled again!"

Tyler was up instantly. He grabbed Erno by the shirt. "Who did you tell?"

"Tell? No one!"

"Get the others!" Tyler told Sid. But as soon as Sid left the room an explosion rocked the hall, and the lights went out. Tyler still had hold of Erno's shirt, and dragged him to the floor. The air was full of stinging fumes.

"Follow me if you want to live!" Tyler whispered.

They crawled away from the hall door, toward the back of the room. In the light of the wall screen, Tyler upended the cot and yanked open a meter-square door set into the wall. When Erno hesitated, Tyler dragged him into the dark tunnel beyond.

They crawled on hands and knees for a long time. Erno's eyes teared from the gas, and he coughed until he vomited. Tyler pulled him along in the blackness until they reached a chamber, dimly lit in red, where they could stand. On the other side of the chamber was a pressure door.

"Put this on," Tyler said, shoving a surface suit into Erno's arms. "Quickly!"

Erno struggled to pull on the skintight, still gasping for breath. "I swear I had nothing to do with this," he said.

"I know," Tyler said. He sealed up his own suit and locked down his tiger-striped helmet.

"Brace yourself. This isn't an airlock," Tyler said, and hit the control on the exterior door.

The moment the door showed a gap, the air blew out of the chamber, almost knocking Erno off his feet. When it opened wide enough, they staggered through into a crevasse. The moisture in the escaping air froze and fell as frost in the vacuum around them. Erno wondered if their pursuers would be able to seal the tube or get back behind a pressure door before they passed out.

Tyler and Erno emerged from the crevasse into a sloping pit, half of which was lit by the glare of hard sunlight. They scrambled up the slope through six centimeters of dust and reached the surface.

"Now what?" Erno said.

Tyler shook his head and put his hand against Erno's faceplate. He leaned over and touched his helmet to Erno's. "Private six, encrypted."

Erno switched his suit radio.

"They won't be out after us for some time," Tyler said. "Since we left that Judas-book of yours behind, they may not even know where we are."

"Judas book?"

"Your notebook—you must have had it with you when the constables questioned you."

"Yes. But they didn't know what the download meant or they wouldn't have returned it to me."

"Returned it to you? Dumbass. They put a tracer in it."

Erno could see Tyler's dark eyes dimly through the faceplate, inches from his own, yet separated by more than glass and vacuum. "I'm sorry."

"Forget it."

"When we go back, we'll be arrested. We might be banished."

"We're not going back just yet. Follow me."

"Where can we go?"

"There's a construction shack at an abandoned ilemenite mine south of here. It's a bit of a hike—two to three hours—but what else are we going to do on such a fine morning?"

Tyler turned and hopped off across the surface. Erno stood dumbly for a moment, then followed.

They headed south along the western side of the crater. The ground was much rockier, full of huge boulders and pits where ancient lava tubes had collapsed millennia ago. The suit Erno wore was too tight, and pinched him in the armpits and crotch. His thermoregulators struggled against the open sunlight, and he felt his body inside the skintight slick with sweat. The bind in his crotch became a stabbing pain with every stride.

Around to the south side of Fowler, they struck off to the south. Tyler followed a line of boot prints and tractor treads in the dust. The land rose to Adil's Ridge after a couple of kilometers, from which Erno looked back and saw, for the first time, all of the domed crater where he had spent his entire life.

"Is this construction shack habitable?" he asked.

"I've got it outfitted."

"What are we going to do? We can't stay out here forever."

"We won't. They'll calm down. You forget that we haven't done anything but spray a prank message on the dome. I'm a comedian. What do they expect from a comedian?"

Erno did not remind Tyler of the possible decompression injuries their escape might have caused. He tucked his head down and focused on keeping up with the big man's steady pace. He drew deep breaths. They skipped along without speaking for an hour or more. Off to their left, Erno noticed a line of distant pylons, with threads of cable strung between them. It was the cable train route from Fowler to Tsander several hundred kilometers south.

Tyler began to speak. "I'm working on some new material. For my comeback performance. It's about the difference between love and sex."

"Okay. So what's the difference?"

"Sex is like a fresh steak. It smells great, you salivate, you consume it in a couple of minutes, you're satisfied, you feel great, and you fall asleep."

"And love?"

"Love is completely different. Love is like flash-frozen food—it lasts forever. Cold as liquid hydrogen. You take it out when you need it, warm it up. You persuade yourself it's just as good as sex. People who promote love say it's even better, but that's a lie constructed out of necessity. The only thing it's better than is starving to death."

"Needs a little work," Erno said. After a moment he added. "There's a story in *Stories for Men* about love."

"I'd think the stories for men would be about sex."

"No. There's no sex in any of them. There's hardly any women at all. Most of them are about men competing with other men. But there's one about a rich man who bets a poor young man that hunger is stronger than love. He locks the poor man and his lover in separate rooms with a window between them, for seven days, without food. At the end of the seven days they're starving. Then he puts them together in a room with a single piece of bread."

"Who eats it?"

"The man grabs it, and is at the point of eating it when he looks over at the woman, almost unconscious from hunger. He gives it to her. She refuses it, says he should have it because he's more hungry than she is. So they win the bet."

Tyler laughed. "If it had been a steak, they would have lost." They continued hiking for a while. "That story isn't about love. It's about the poor man beating the rich man."

Erno considered it. "Maybe."

"So what have you learned from that book? Anything?"

"Well, there's a lot of killing—it's like the writers are obsessed with killing. The characters kill for fun, or sport, or money, or freedom, or to get respect. Or women."

"That's the way it was back then, Erno. Men—"

Tyler's voice was blotted out by a tone blaring over their earphones. After fifteen seconds an AI voice came on:

"SATELLITES REPORT A MAJOR SOLAR CORONAL MASS EJECTION. PARTICLE FLUX WILL BEGIN TO RISE IN TWENTY MINUTES, REACHING LETHAL LEVELS WITHIN THIRTY. ALL PERSONS ON THE SURFACE SHOULD IMMEDIATELY SEEK SHELTER. REFRAIN FROM EXPOSURE UNTIL THE ALL CLEAR SOUNDS.

"REPEAT: A MAJOR SOLAR RADIATION EVENT HAS OCCURRED. ALL PERSONS SHOULD IMMEDIATELY TAKE SHELTER."

Both of them stopped. Erno scanned the sky, frantic. Of course there was no difference. The sun threw the same harsh glare it always threw. His heart thudded in his ears. He heard Tyler's deep breaths in his earphones.

"How insulated is this shack?" he asked Tyler. "Can it stand a solar storm?"

Tyler didn't answer for a moment. "I doubt it."

"How about the mine? Is there a radiation shelter? Or a tunnel?"

"It was a strip mine. Besides," Tyler said calmly, "we couldn't get there in twenty minutes."

They were more than an hour south of the colony.

Erno scanned the horizon, looking for some sign of shelter. A crevasse, a lava tube—maybe they'd run out of air, but at least they would not fry. He saw, again, the threads of the cable towers to the east.

"The cable line!" Erno said. "It has radiation shelters for the cable cars all along it."

"If we can reach one in time."

Erno checked his clock readout. 0237. Figure they had until 0300. He leapt off due east, toward the cable towers. Tyler followed.

The next fifteen minutes passed in a trance, a surreal slow motion broken field race through the dust and boulders toward the pylons to the east. Erno pushed himself to the edge of his strength, until a haze of spots rose before his eyes. They seemed to move with agonizing slowness.

They were 500 meters from the cable pylon. 300 meters. 100 meters. They were beneath it.

When they reached the pylon, Erno scanned in both directions for a shelter. The cable line was designed to dip underground for radiation protection periodically all along the length of its route. The distance between the tunnels was determined by the top speed of the cable car and the amount of advance warning the passengers were likely to get of a solar event. There was no way of telling how far they were from a shelter, or in which direction the closest lay.

"South," Tyler said. "The colony is the next shelter north, and it's too far for us to run, so our only shot should be south."

It was 0251. They ran south, their leaps no longer strong and low, but with a weary desperation to them now. Erno kept his eyes fixed on the horizon. The twin cables stretched above them like strands of spider's web, silver in the sunlight, disappearing far ahead where the next T pylon stood like the finish line in a race.

The T grew, and suddenly they were on it. Beyond, in its next arc, the cable swooped down to the horizon. They kept running, and as they drew closer, Erno saw that a tunnel opened in the distance, and the cable ran into it. He gasped out a moan that was all the shout he could make.

They were almost there when Erno realized that Tyler had slowed, and was no longer keeping up. He willed himself to stop, awkwardly, almost pitching face first into the regolith. He looked back. Tyler had slowed to a stroll.

"What's wrong?" Erno gasped.

"Nothing," Tyler said. Though Erno could hear Tyler's ragged breath, there was no hurry in his voice.

"Come on!" Erno shouted.

Tyler stopped completely. "Women and children first."

Erno tried to catch his breath. His clock read 0304. "What?"

"You go ahead. Save your pathetic life."

"Are you crazy? Do you want to die?"

"Of course not. I want you to go in first."

"Why?"

"If you can't figure it out by now, I can't explain it, Erno. It's a story for a man."

Erno stood dumbstruck.

"Come out here into the sunshine with me," Tyler said. "It's nice out here."

Erno laughed. He took a step back toward Tyler. He took another. They stood side by side.

"That's my man Erno. Now, how long can you stay out here?"

The sun beat brightly down. The tunnel mouth gaped five meters in front of them. 0307. 0309. Each watched the other, neither budged.

"My life isn't pathetic," Erno said.

"Depends on how you look at it," Tyler replied.

"Don't you think yours is worth saving?"

"What makes you think this is a real radiation alert, Erno? The broadcast could be a trick to make us come back."

"There have been warnings posted for weeks."

"That only makes it a more plausible trick."

"That's no reason for us to risk our lives—on the chance it is."

"I don't think it's a trick, Erno. I'll go into that tunnel. After you."

Erno stared at the dark tunnel ahead. 0311. A single leap from safety. Even now lethal levels of radiation might be sluicing through their bodies. A bead of sweat stung his eye.

"So this is what it means to be a man?" Erno said softly, as much to himself as to Tyler.

"This is it," Tyler said. "And I'm a better man than you are."

Erno felt an adrenaline surge. "You're not better than me."

"We'll find out."

"You haven't accomplished anything."

"I don't need you to tell me what I've accomplished. Go ahead, Erno. Back to your cave."

0312. 0313. Erno could feel the radiation. It was shattering proteins and DNA throughout his body, rupturing cell walls, turning the miraculously ordered organic molecules of his brain into sludge. He thought about Alicia, the curve of her breast, the light in her eyes. Had she told her friends that he had hit her? And his mother. He saw the shock and surprise in her face when the book hit her. How angry he had been. He wanted to explain to her why he had thrown it. It shouldn't be that hard to explain.

He saw his shadow reaching out beside him, sharp and steady, two arms, two legs and a head, an ape somehow transported to the moon. No, not an ape—a man. What a miracle that a man could keep himself alive in this harsh place—not just keep alive, but make a home of it. All the intellect and planning and work that had gone to put him here, standing out under the brutal sun, letting it exterminate him.

He looked at Tyler, fixed as stone.

"This is insane," Erno said—then ran for the tunnel.

A second after he sheltered inside, Tyler was there beside him.

fourteen

They found the radiation shelter midway through the tunnel, closed themselves inside, stripped off their suits, drank some water, breathed the cool air. They crowded in the tiny stone room together, smelling each other's sweat. Erno started to get sick: he had chills, he felt nausea. Tyler made him sip water, put his arm around Erno's shoulders.

Tyler said it was radiation poisoning, but Erno said it was not. He sat wordless in the corner the nine hours it took until the all-clear came. Then, ignoring Tyler, he suited up and headed back to the colony.

fifteen

So that is the story of how Erno discovered that he was not a man. That, indeed, Tyler was right, and there was no place for men in the Society of Cousins. And that he, Erno,despite his grievances and rage, was a cousin.

The cost of this discovery was Erno's own banishment, and one thing more.

When Erno turned himself in at the constabulary headquarters, eager to tell them about GROSS and ready to help them find Tyler, he was surprised at their subdued reaction. They asked him no questions. They looked at him funny, eyes full of rage and something besides rage. Horror? Loathing? Pity? They put him in the same white room where he had sat before, and left him there alone. After a while the blond interrogator, Mona, came in and told him that three people had been injured when Tyler and Erno had blown the vacuum seal while escaping. One, who had insisted on crawling after them through the escape tunnel, had been caught in there and died: Erno's mother.

Erno and Tyler were given separate trials, and the colony voted: they were to be expelled. Tyler's banishment was permanent; Erno was free to apply for readmission in ten years.

The night before he left, Erno, accompanied by a constable, was allowed to visit his home. Knowing how completely inadequate it was, he apologized to his sister, his aunt and cousins. Aunt Sophie and Nick treated him with stiff rectitude. Celeste, who somehow did not feel the rage against him that he deserved, cried and embraced him. They let him pack a duffel with a number of items from his room.

After leaving, he asked the constable if he could stop a moment on the terrace outside the apartment before going back to jail. He took a last look at the vista of the domed crater from the place where he had lived every day of his life. He drew a deep breath and closed his eyes. His mother seemed everywhere around him. All he could see was her crawling, on hands and knees in the dark, desperately trying to save him from himself. How angry she must have been, and how afraid. What must she have thought, as the air flew away and she felt her coming death? Did she regret giving birth to him?

He opened his eyes. There on the terrace stood the recycler he had thrown pebbles at for years. He reached into his pack, pulled out *Stories for Men,* and stepped toward the bin.

Alicia came around a corner. "Hello, Erno," she said.

A step from the trash bin, Erno held the book awkwardly in his hand, trying to think of something to say. The constable watched them.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am," he told Alicia.

"I know you didn't mean this to happen," she said.

"It doesn't matter what I meant. It happened."

On impulse, he handed her the copy of *Stories for Men*. "I don't know what to do with this," he said. "Will you keep it for me?"

The next morning they put him on the cable car for Tsander. His exile had begun. O

THE UNEXPECTED UNEXPLAINED

The ghosts were complaining again last night. They don't like that they're sinking into the ground. No one told them it would be like this. They want to be haunting the living and taking effortless trips through the air, floating like dreams of flying. That was the promise.

But now they cry and they moan and their sounds come up and fill the world for as long as they can before the grains of dirt and the dense rock muffles whatever stories they still have in them. Leftovers trying to nourish the spirits of you and me.

—Mario Milosevic

ON BOOKS

Norman Spinrad

MOVEMENTS

THE LAST HOT TIME
by John M. Ford
Tor, $12.95
ISBN: 0312875789

PERDIDO STREET STATION
by China Miéville
Del Rey, $18.00
ISBN: 0345443020

Voyage à l'envers
by Philippe Curval
Millénaires, EUR 12.94
ISBN: 2290307270

APPLESEED
by John Clute
Tor, $25.95
ISBN: 0765303787

In the process of writing a piece for the *Bulletin* of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (of which as I write this I am currently president) it suddenly struck me that "SF" (meaning in this context both science fiction and fantasy) has not really experienced a true literary movement since the advent of Cyberpunk in the 1980s.

What, you may well ask, do I mean by a literary movement, and do we, you may well demand, really need one?

Well, I would make a distinction between marketing attempts to create phony literary movements, of which we have many and which we can well do without, and genuine literary movements, which, it seems to me, if perhaps not essential to a mode like speculative fiction, have certainly proven to be watersheds that have evolved the literature upward and onward from time to time.

By a genuine literary movement, I mean a group of writers, however large or small, sometimes including one or more editors, sometimes not, who collectively seek a transformation in a literary mode, sometimes conscious of their collective enterprise from the beginning, sometimes awakening to the realization that that is what they are doing in the middle of the process, or perhaps even after it is over.

There are and have been all sorts of literary movements, and of course the phenomenon is hardly confined to speculative fiction. Sometimes they are centered on questions of content, sometimes on questions of form and/or prose style, sometimes they are centered on an ideology or a shared mystical vision, assuming there is a difference, sometimes on some combination of these elements.

But speculative fiction is a peculiar and special case, for it is the only literature whose essential nature requires it to evolve.

Historical fiction may or may not evolve different forms, styles, angles of attack, philosophical viewpoints, political ideologies, and so forth, with which to treat its subject matter, but the subject matter itself is fixed in the past and so such evolution is not necessary or inevitable. Likewise contemporary fiction, dealing as it does with what its practitioners at least conceive of as "the present" is also concerned with content that is a fixed given.

But while by their very natures

historical and contemporary fiction *describe* pre-existing realities and their stories take place within them, speculative fiction, by *its* very nature, must take place within non-existent realities, fictional worlds that its practitioners must create.

If they do not, it is just not speculative fiction. Whether science fiction or fantasy, the writers thereof must create their fictional universes entire.

Fantasy, of course, is a much older mode than science fiction; indeed, since most of this planet was terra incognita to its disparate and isolated cultures for most of our species' existence upon it, and since the nature of the physical universe and the laws that govern it did not really begin to become elucidated to a literarily useful degree until, say, the turn of the nineteenth century, fantasy may arguably be said to be the Ur-literature.

Who really knew what was possible beyond the bounds of the then-current local maps? Could the Greeks who listened to Homer's epics when they were first composed really know, for instance, where the *Iliad,* a recounting of what was apparently a real war, stopped being historical fiction and became fantasy when the doings of the gods were factored in? Might the audience for the *Odyssey* not have taken it as a series of travel tales? Even today, there is still argument as to whether Plato's *Republic* was pure speculative non-fiction, or whether he was setting it in a real lost Atlantis that once existed out there somewhere.

So fantasy always created its own fictional universes and what we in our current hubric wisdom are pleased to consider "realistic" or "mimetic" fiction could hardly exist until the globe was well explored, the blank spaces on the maps filled in, and the laws of mass and energy became at least roughly known.

Science fiction, on the other hand, by its very nature, is a comparatively new literary mode, a child of the twentieth century, or the mid-nineteenth at the very earliest.

For, being the literature of the presently non-existent possible, such a literature could hardly exist without a general understanding—at least on higher intellectual levels and certainly among those who would seek to write it—of what the laws of the physically possible were sufficient to enable its creators to extrapolate altered or evolved worlds and realities that transcended the present consensus reality but were possible within them.

This is the essence of extrapolation, and extrapolation is the essence of science fiction. Indeed, extrapolation, as the relationship between the two words implies, is the essence of the wider realm of speculative fiction itself.

The wider realm because the name "science fiction" is an historical accident, a misleading term hung on what has always been a more inclusive form, even from its early beginnings as Hugo Gernsback's "scientifiction." For this mode, in theory and from its very beginnings in practice, has never required that its extrapolation or speculative element be a scientific or technological one, only that, whatever that speculative element—scientific, technological, political, cultural—the story itself takes place within the universe of the scientifically possible.

This is one reason that science fiction, if you prefer, or speculative fiction if you don't, is a literature whose nature requires it to evolve. For over the past three quarters of a century or so since Gernsback created the commercial genre, our knowledge of physical reality itself has widened and deepened and become much more subtle and the technosphere that knowledge has allowed us to create in the real world has mutated and proliferated exponentially. And science fiction has therefore had to evolve to remain within the curl of this wave as it moves into the future.

Ironically enough, the commercial tag "science fiction" under which this literature has so long been ghettoized to its detriment may also in retrospect be seen as a kind of evolutionary engine in itself. Gernsback conceived of "scientifiction" as an action adventure sugar-coating for the scientific education of the callow masses, but the "science fiction" that it swiftly became even in *Amazing Stories* did not fit the happenstance label. And that dichotomy created a confusion that, viewed positively as a dialectic, helped to create the series of movements that have shaped and evolved the literature ever since.

It didn't take long for writers of general pulp adventure fiction to take advantage of the new market, and that could be said to be when "scientifiction" became "science fiction," and soon enough "space opera," as the action adventure story element became the central raison d'être while the scientific and technological extrapolation was reduced to becoming the necessary trappings.

One might not wish to dignify this development as a "movement"—indeed one might wish to consider it a schlocko devolution, as Gernsback did. But soon thereafter came John W. Campbell, Jr.'s, counter-revolution in the pages of *Astounding* and this, being based strongly on Campbell's literary theories and ideologies, surely was a literary movement that transformed the mode.

Like Gernsback, Campbell eschewed, or tried to eschew, science fiction that was simply action adventure in science fictional drag, and he was certainly centrally concerned, one might fairly say obsessed, with scientific and technological speculation. But he was no aficionado of using simple action adventure to walk readers through it.

Instead, what he wanted was fiction where the speculative scientific and technological elements were the McGuffins that created the stories, where they created the dramatic tensions and were integral to their eventual resolutions, or stories centered on the cultural and/or psychological effects of scientific and technological evolution, and ideally stories that were both.

This was the so-called "Golden Age," and it was Campbell and the writers around him who formed the movement, science fiction's first true literary movement, that created it—Heinlein, Asimov, van Vogt, Simak, Del Rey, Sturgeon, to name just a few. And merely to name them is to make clear how much the transformative effects of this movement still resonate today.

In the post-war era, the next literary movement, centered on H.L. Gold's *Galaxy,* where there was an opening to the "soft sciences" like psychology, cultural anthropology and sociology, and Anthony Boucher's *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction,* where the new emphasis was on more sophisticated style, was perforce more diffuse.

But the writers who evolved through it—Dick, Pohl, Kornbluth, Leiber, Budrys, Bester, to name a random few out of many—transformed the mode so much that its practitioners had evolved to the point where they were ready to create perhaps the greatest evolution science fiction has ever seen when paperback novel publishing, pioneered by Ballantine Books, opened the commercial door—the transformation from a literature in which short fiction dominated to what we have today, a science fiction whose dominant form is the novel.

The next two transformative moments occurred at roughly the same time, the 1960s. One was very prominent and the subject of much loud public controversy, and the other, in retrospect, may have been hidden in plain sight.

The "New Wave," centered at first in Michael Moorcock's British magazine *New Worlds* and championed in the United States by the critic Judith Merril, ended up being several literary movements in the guise of one, but all of them were subsets of the cultural war of the time.

Moorcock's vision was twofold. One aspect was a complex theory of the possibility of mutated relationships between storyline, form, and prose style too recondite to go into fully here, except to say, as will be relevant later, that Moorcock's thesis was that the prose line itself did not have to follow or slavishly serve the story line but could dip and glide around it in the manner of poetry.

But the other aspect was that "establishment" contemporary mimetic literature had reached a dead end in terms of content and science fiction was mired in pulp conventions in terms of prose and angle of attack, and a cross-fertilization was necessary in order to revivify both.

Thus the British New Wave was an attempt to create a literary fusion between, as I myself was saying at the time, an establishment literature applying puissant techniques to the contemplation of the lint in its own belly button and a science fiction treating themes and material of cosmic import in a trivial manner.

In the United States, via Harlan Ellison's landmark anthology *Dangerous Visions* and the novel editorships of Terry Carr and George Ernsberger, the New Wave became also a breaking of the taboos that had restricted what publishers considered a "young adult genre," a kicking out of the jambs to admit sex, drugs, rock and roll, altered states of consciousness, radical politics, "dirty" language, experimental prose.

For the first time, speculative fiction had a literary movement that sought to relate the literature to what was going on in the macroculture on the one hand, and sought to bring its speculative vision to the great world outside its ghetto walls on the other.

The writers associated with this movement (willingly or not)—Samuel R. Delany, Moorcock, J.G. Ballard, Roger Zelazny, Barry Malzberg, Harlan Ellison, Thomas M. Disch, Philip José Farmer, myself, Brian W. Aldiss, among many others—along with a few courageous editors, utterly transformed the mode into what it now is. The New Wave was never any great commercial success, but perhaps a third of the SF novels published today could not have seen print before it opened the door to anything.

But there was another movement going on at the same time that, though not really perceived as such, in the end created an even greater transformation.

It is hard to imagine today, but before J.R.R. Tolkein's Lord of the Rings trilogy achieved its great commercial success in paperback, virtually no original fantasy was being published in the United States. Seeking to cash in on the Tolkein phenomenon, Betty Ballantine commissioned Lin Carter to dig deep and come up with pre-existing old fantasy titles that Ballantine Books could reprint in paperback.

When this line of reprints proved commercially successful and the vein of pre-existing fantasy novels began to peter out, she took the next obvious step and sought to commission the writing of original fantasy novels. Since science fiction was Ballantine's strong suit and she was well-connected to the people who wrote it, Betty Ballantine persuaded science fiction writers to write fantasy as well, and published the results in the same genre line as Ballantine's science fiction.

Voila, the "SF" genre encompassing both science fiction and fantasy as more or less the same thing, at least in marketing terms, in which the latter is now dominant over the former.

The next literary movement within the field was of course the Cyberpunk Movement, the first one to be proclaimed a Movement by its core practitioners—William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, John Shirley, Rudy Rucker, Pat Cadigan, etc.

Cyberpunk was many things to many people, but in terms of its transformative literary effect, the key concept was the name itself and Gibson's famous catchphrase that "the street finds its own uses."

The New Wave Movement was born during the Countercultural Revolution of the 1960s, which itself became heavily enmeshed in the politics of the Viet Nam War. Because technology was seen as the servant of the military, and therefore the instrument of the Establishment, the techie mindset came to be seen as an outmoded style of consciousness, and so both the Counterculture itself and its New Wave avatar were basically technophobic.

At the time, few people saw the irony in the fact that both were boogying and protesting evil technophilia to rock and roll, a relentlessly technological music whose very existence was based on the electric guitar and the synthesizer.

But the children of the hippies became the punks of the 1970s and 1980s and were in rebellion against, among other things, the technophobia of the previous generation of rebels. *They* were "the street" that would "find its own uses" for technology when Gibson and the Cyberpunks pointed them toward computers, the then non-existent Web, hacking, and virtual reality.

Thus was the gap between technology and the eternal underground demi-mode bridged, the gap between "cyberspace" and the technosphere and the "punks," and voila, cyberpunks, the first technophilic outlaw rebels.

And after the Cyberpunk Movement there came . . .

There came . . .

There came a lame series of marketing attempts to create artificial "movements" to cash in on the commercial success of "Cyberpunk" as a marketing label and a self-proclaimed literary movement in the macroculture. "Splatterpunk." "Steampunk." "Elfpunk." "Punkpunk." Whatever.

This is not to say that these attempts at hype were mainly the creation of the writers involved nor that some of them were not playing ironic games nor that the books published under the labels were necessarily without merit. But since none of these ersatz "movements" either arose out of the zeitgeist or truly championed any sort of new literary modes with which to express it, they generated no evolutionary transformations. And there has been no coherent collective literary enterprise within "SF" since the Cyberpunks, no real sense of collective literary mission.

Is this necessarily a bad thing? After all, many fine novels have been written during its long absence. Perhaps the age of movements is over. Perhaps in the end its passing is a liberation.

Or perhaps not.

Perhaps a long fallow period was not only inevitable but necessary. And perhaps, just maybe, something new is barely beginning to happen.

Take a writer like John M. Ford,

who has written science fiction, and who has written fantasy, and who, in *The Last Hot Time,* has written a novel that is both . . . that is neither . . . that, frankly, Scarlett, doesn't seem to give a damn.

Here Ford has created a fictional world in which science and a kind of magic, elves and gangsters out of roman noir fiction, mingle seamlessly in a "City" that is part dark fantasy and part a transformation of Al Capone's Chicago, yet is entirely itself and entirely "believable."

Somehow the magical realm of the elves has broken through into our own reality (among other things a metaphor for the breakthrough of fantasy into science fiction) and transformed it into a crazy-quilt of realms in which magical and technological powers apply in varying degrees at different times in different places and the borders between these supposedly disparate realities continually shift and mutate as humankind contends with dominant elfkind.

Yet this conflict is presented in a curious manner as a kind of old-fashioned gang war out of the 1920s and 1930s. Elf gangsters and human gangsters form alliances. And these are strange elves, who may behave like medieval magical hierarchical creatures in their realm, but seem more like Mafia dons, their consiglieres, and soldiers in ours.

Understand that this is not at all a comic or satiric novel. Far from it, it is a bildungsroman of the coming of age in the City of a kid named Danny from the boonies who rises to become Doc, a gangland power in both realms, and it is a dark tale rendered elegantly with deep psychological realism.

So what sort of novel is this really and what does it begin to portend?

Well, the critic Alexei Panshin once wrote of "science fiction that knows it's science fiction," meaning, roughly, that the writers thereof know that they are playing a literary game, are utilizing certain literary techniques to create a suspension of disbelief on the part of the readers to create the illusion that what they are experiencing is a mimesis of some future or parallel possible reality, when actually the story is a kind of fantasy.

The Last Hot Time carries this a step further and in a somewhat different direction. Here Ford gives us a City that has the feel of Nelson Algren's Chicago or the realm of a Harlan Ellison story in his contemporary street mode, but throws in elves and their magic while using his literary powers to mix it all together so that the reader experiences it all on the same reality level.

A *science fictional* reality level, somehow. The world of *The Last Hot Time* has more of a feeling of mimetic reality on psychological and esthetic levels than almost all space opera and much "hard SF."

It is interesting, amusing even, that Ford chooses to call his non-human creatures "elves" even though the techniques he applies and the qualities he gives them would easily enough allow him to present them as aliens from another world or time or dimension. It is as if he is challenging himself to make such a thing work, or telling the reader what he is trying to do as he begins to point "SF" in a strange new direction.

The Last Hot Time is not science fiction, it is not exactly fantasy, it is not even quite a melange of the two. Rather it is a kind of provisional synthesis, a successful attempt to take a marketing label, "SF," under which both science fiction and fantasy are published, and transform it into a new literary mode that may some day transcend its origin as a mere commercial rubric.

China Miéville takes it one step

further in *Perdido Street Station*. Miéville, for my money (and in this case it really *was* my money, since, having read his previous work and having not been sent a review copy, I eagerly shelled out for this one myself) is one of the most interesting and already accomplished writers to have entered the extended "SF" genre in the past few years, and in this novel he extends the sort of thing that Ford toys with in *The Last Hot Time* in a kind of converse direction.

Perdido Street Station is set in the City of New Crobuzon on an unnamed planet somewhere and/or somewhen inhabited by humans as well as a profusion of other creatures of varying degrees of sentience. The novel is enormous—867 pages in the British paperback edition that I bought in Italy—and it gives the impression that there is an immense and variegated fictional world out there beyond the limits of the vast, sprawling, and variegated city where most of the story takes place, whether Miéville intends to explore it in a series of sequels or not.

Perhaps one of the reasons I think he might is that *Perdido Street Station* somehow reminds me of Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast,* which began with one huge novel set entirely in a vast, crumbling, seemingly infinitely-roomed gothic mansion and exfoliated into a trilogy.

Just as the mansion of the title seemed to be the central character in *Gormenghast,* so does New Crobuzon seem to be the central character in *Perdido Street Station,* though the human and non-human characters in Miéville's novel are much more realistically drawn, the pace is far from as glacially slow as the Peake, and there is a well-limned complex story-line. Then, too, New Crobuzon has a somewhat similar gothic feel, a city that has been slowly decaying for a millennium or so.

Or perhaps "Dickensian" is closer to the mark, for New Crobuzon also has the feel of a kind of Dickensian Victorian London, albeit one in which magic and a kind of retro technology coexist more or less seamlessly, a strange melange of fantasy, "steampunk," and an elusive something that makes it akin to Michael Moorcock's *Mother London*.

So far, this no doubt sounds like a description of a fairly familiar kind of fantasy, and perhaps of a identifiably British sort. However . . .

However, the book is prefaced by a quotation:

"I even gave up, for a while, stopping by the window of the room to look out at the lights and deep, illuminated streets. That's a form of dying, that losing contact with the city like that."

Well, this quote would seem to be a lot more relevant to Miéville than it is to me, since the characters in *Perdido Street Station* never lose contact with the city, but rather, with one or two exceptions, are utterly immersed in its reality. Or perhaps this reversal *is* Miéville's point in giving us this quotation.

But given the nature of the novel it precedes, the source of the quote is surprising and enigmatic—*We Can Build You* by Philip K. Dick, a thoroughgoing science fiction novel by a writer hardly known to even dabble in anything like "steampunk fantasy."

However, just as Dick, the greatest metaphysical novelist of all time, was more than a science fiction writer in any conventional sense, so is *Perdido Street Station* more than a conventional "steampunk fantasy," even though Miéville might be said to be creating such a genre therein, and perhaps Miéville is justly proclaiming a kinship to Dick by prefacing a novel totally unlike anything Dick ever wrote with an homage to him.

And perhaps that is a key to something important.

No writer's work has ever been more thematically centered on the metaphysical and psychological and moral exploration of not only altered states of consciousness but the multiplexity of reality than that of Philip K. Dick. Indeed, in the Dickian weltanschauung, there is no such thing as a "base reality," our consensus reality in which the well-known scientific laws of mass and energy determine the boundaries.

In this sense, there is more "magic" in the oeuvre of Dick than in any thousand-foot shelf of conventional commercial fantasy. And yet I have never heard of anyone seriously contending that Dick did not write science fiction.

This, I would contend (and I can conceive of no other explanation) is because Dick not only applied the techniques of the science fiction writer to his material, but viewed it with a kind of science fictional sensibility, and sought, successfully more often than not, to convey this effect to his readers. However outré, however metaphysically transformed the states of reality portrayed, Dick portrayed them with the literary tools and angle of attack of the science fiction writer, persuading his readers and perhaps himself that they were aspects of the same extended multiverse they in fact inhabited. From a certain constipated point of view, Dick could be said to have written fantasy and conned his readership into accepting it as science fiction.

Miéville does something rather similar (but with a significant difference)in *Perdido Street Station,* and perhaps that is what he is cryptically proclaiming. Here magic and technology operate on the same creaky problematic retro level, both vaguely Victorian, rather unreliable, and somehow past the peak of his world's previously higher level of more assured competence. And the feel of it is rendered somehow science fictional by that very rusty nuts and bolts approach to both magic and technology.

But Miéville makes not the slightest pass at convincing the reader that the world of *Perdido Street Station* is in any way connected to the universe or the consensus reality they inhabit. This novel forthrightly takes place in an entirely fictional reality. There is no connection to the planet Earth or its denizens; either to the imagery, tropes, or cultural myths used by writers of conventional fantasy to create psychological resonance or to the methods used by science fiction writers to transport readers from the here and now to the there and then while convincing them that they remain within the multiverse of their personal possible.

Whether *Perdido Street Station* is "science fiction that knows it's science fiction" or "fantasy in science fictional drag" is irrelevant. This is fiction that not only knows but proclaims that it is fiction.

Thus, ironically, while fantasy has first infiltrated science fiction and then become commercially dominant over it within the "SF" genre, here we have an example, and *The Last Hot Time* is another, of the tropes and techniques of science fiction infiltrating fantasy, and perhaps in the end coming to dominate it on a literary level.

Perhaps this is why Miéville does not quite take the next step and abandon the illusion of mimesis for the realm of unabashed literary surrealism, where the skein of events, and perhaps even the style, follows a purely literary logic, where questions of reality levels become irrelevant, where the illusion of verisimilitude is not even a goal.

In *Voyage à l'envers,* Philippe Curval comes even closer, albeit from a different direction. Curval is one of the deans of French science fiction, he's been writing it for decades, and so, in terms of the new trend that seems to be emerging, it's interesting to see something like this coming from such a veteran.

Curval is a fellow critic of SF on the side, and intellectually sophisticated in general, but on the other hand has always been deeply involved in science fiction, so it's difficult to walk the line between assuming that he intended doing just what I believe he's done or supposing that this novel is a kind of "failure."

What he's done in *Voyage à l'envers* (roughly translatable as "Voyage to the Inverse") is thrown together an incredible number of science fiction tropes, schticks, notions, ploys, in the same novel. SETI. First contact. The interstellar voyage. Time-dilation effects. Time reversal. A subtle form of mind control. Reality control. Alien invasion. Strange alien technology. Strange alien psychology. And more.

Nor does it all seem to be taking place on the same reality level. Some of it is psychologically realistic. Some of it is rendered from a dryly sophisticated and gentle sardonic viewpoint. Some of it is finely rendered hard science fiction. Some of it is almost parodically "sci-fi."

It would be facile to conclude that *Voyage à l'envers* is a failed hodgepodge, where Curval threw in everything but the kitchen sink and stirred with a swizzle stick, a wry grin, and a Gallic shrug, except for two things:

"Voyage à l'envers" could just as well be translated as "Voyage Backwards," and Curval, as fiction writer and critic, has a long and intimate relation with and knowledge of the literature of science fiction. From that perspective, this novel appears as both a voyage backward through the tropes of that literature, and a kind of voyage backward to the future thereof, wherein Curval deliberately digests it all, and then regurgitates it in a not unsuccessful attempt to free it not only from its history but from its historical pretense at mimesis to create a science fiction that not only knows that it's science fiction but knows and proclaims quite loudly that science fiction is and has always been a series of literary games.

And curiously, very curiously indeed, toward the end of his long and successful career, that most emblematic of hard science fiction writers, Robert A. Heinlein, attempted very much the same thing.

Heinlein's later novels—*I Will Fear No Evil, The Number of the Beast, The Cat Who Walks Through Walls, Job: A Comedy of Justice*—in which he threw together hodgepodges of characters and tropes from his previous work somewhat in the manner of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s, *Breakfast of Champions,* only more so—have generally been dismissed as the rantings of a great writer who had simply lost it toward the end of his life.

But maybe not. In light of what Curval has done decades later with the genre entire—and remember that Curval is also a sophisticated critic—it could be argued that, far from mining his own backlist to produce paste-ups verging on gibberish, Heinlein, that most mimetic of science fiction writers, was struggling at the end of his career, albeit not quite successfully, to make the transformation that the field seems to be approaching today—to abandon mimesis, to free himself from the need to create the illusion of verisimilitude to write a kind of meta-SF in which "science fiction that knows it's science fiction" becomes the subject for a fiction that transcends its previous connection to consensus reality to become a self-referential visionary fiction that exists entirely within a forthrightly and unabashedly fictional universe.

John Clute is also a critic, and an exceedingly erudite one, so erudite, some would contend, that his criticism sometimes verges on being truly comprehensible only to himself. He loves complex sentence structures, obscure words, prose rhythms, to the point where his criticism sometimes seems to have an almost musical focus.

Clute, it would seem, values prose for its own pleasures over what it is conveying. Interesting, then, that in light of the foregoing, after all these years writing criticism, he has chosen to write his first novel, *Appleseed*.

Appleseed is a kind of space opera. Or, better, *all* kinds of space opera. Clute's fictional universe is so relentlessly strange, so crammed with fictional aliens far more bizarre than anyone has attempted to create before, takes place on so many utterly outré levels and flavors of reality, that it is not only impossible for anyone but Clute to begin to describe, but impossible for anyone to suspend their disbelief long enough to take it on a mimetic level.

Indeed, toward the end, it becomes so complex, so metaphysically strange, so detached from anything even minimally comprehensible to mere human consciousness, that Clute himself, attempting to describe the indescribable, to elucidate the unelucidatable, seems to lose it entirely—or at any rate loses this reader entirely—to become gloriously but incomprehensibly lost in a beautiful sea of words and increasingly elusive images.

But along the way—and indeed for about three quarters of the novel—he accomplishes marvels.

It is hard to believe that Clute can possibly mean this space opera universe to be taken by anyone, himself included, on the level of mimetic reality, to have even the most tenuous connection to consensus reality, to exist in the realm of the possible.

But on another level . . .

On another level, what Clute seems to be doing here is positing a universe created not out of any attempt at extrapolation, or even true science fictional speculation, but out of the literary palette of nearly a century of science fiction.

If the future galaxy were to be filled with a profusion of alien races and cultures as so much space opera has always taken as a given, if this is the literary assumption, then it is going to be *really* strange, Horatio, far stranger than anything in your science fictional philosophies.

Strange? You want strange? Clute seems to say. I'll give you strange!

The universe of *Appleseed* is certainly the strangest one that I've ever encountered, so strange that one struggles to comprehend it, so strange that toward the end Clute begins to lose the magical ability to make it comprehensible.

And yet, there is a new kind of esthetic and even psychological realism to *Appleseed*. Forget about mimesis, forget about scientific rigor or conventional speculation. If the universe really is as generations of science fiction writers have wished it to be, have therefore imagined it in order to play their literary space opera games—filled with advanced elder races, mutated human clades, artificial intelligences—it's going to be a lot stranger than space opera has ever imagined.

On a psychological and metaphysical level, it's going to be chock full of the humanly incomprehensible. Humans who get out there, whether in hypothetical reality or in the pages of a novel attempting to render that reality, are going to find themselves awash in a sea of not merely conventional science fictional wonders but wonders that really do transcend human understanding.

Clute succeeds in creating in the reader this psychological state of metaphysical befuddlement. He does it with the power of prose alone, not true extrapolative speculation. In the end, he fails to make the incomprehensible fully comprehensible.

But for all I know, that was his intent, for after all, by definition the incomprehensible cannot be rendered comprehensible. And thus, in purely literary terms, in purely psychological terms—and this is a "science fiction novel" whose existence *is* purely literary—*Appleseed is* a "realistic" novel.

The alien *will* be truly alien. It cannot be rendered mimetically and comprehensibly, it can only be "realistically" approached asymptotically in a kind of poetic manner, in a "spaceship" built entirely of words, leaving the reader with esthetic affect rather than intellectual understanding.

Is this the transformation that "SF" is approaching? Where, paradoxically, its "fantasy" branch uses the techniques of "science fiction" to create the illusion of connection to consensus reality, while its "science fiction" branch abandons speculative mimesis, abandons its game of imbuing its fictional universes with the illusion of verisimilitude, abandons in a sense those very same techniques, to become a "science fiction that knows it's science fiction," to play a purely literary game?"

No doubt both these trends will continue to expand and exfoliate at the literary cutting edge while more traditional modes of "fantasy" and "science fiction" continue to be written. Perhaps out of this dialectic will emerge something that is neither and both, a new form of literature as presently impossible to comprehend as the end-point of *Appleseed,* a literature that, having broken the bonds of both science fiction and fantasy, will become the characteristic literature of the twenty-first century.

It's been a long strange trip.

Sure to get stranger still.

Stranger than we can presently even imagine.○

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4–6—**TrinoCon, Box 10633, Raleigh NC 27605. www.trinoc–con.org.** Marriott Downtown, Durham NC. Bujold, Arneson.

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4–6—**Maquis Gras, Box 1101, Portage IN 46368. www.maquis.com.** Ramada. J. G. Hertzler, Bill Blair. Star Trek.

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5—**Autumn at Oz, 2669 Beech Mntn. Pkwy., Beech Mountain NC 28604. (828) 387-2000.** Emerald Mountain. Media.

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NEXT ISSUE

DECEMBER HOLIDAY ISSUE

December is our Special Holiday Issue, and, in keeping with long tradition, we bring you a Christmas story, this one by someone who's written *almost* as much Christmas-related stuff as Connie Willis, that redoubtable, jolly, and holiday-spirited Hugo Award-winner **James Patrick Kelly**, who'll take us to a fast-paced and frenetic future for a delicious taste of the latest in "Candy Art." Fear not if you root for Scrooge rather than for Tiny Tim, though—the rest of our December issue turns far from seasonal concerns. In fact, our lead story for December, a big, suspenseful new novella by Hugo Award-winner **Allen M. Steele**, takes us about as far from seasonal concerns as you can get—clear off the planet, in fact, as he takes us back to the newly settled frontier planet of Coyote, where the struggling colonists suddenly receive some totally unexpected guests, bringing them face-to-face with their "Glorious Destiny," and us to the end of the Coyote saga—for the moment, anyway.

ALSO IN DECEMBER

Critically acclaimed British writer **Simon Ings** brings us a sly and frightening variant of the old saw about the man who's "made out of money," as he details the strange and fascinating life of "The Convert"; **Robert Reed**, one of our most prolific and popular writers, takes us to the Moon to explore the unexpected and fateful consequences of "Lying to Dogs"; **Kage Baker**, another of those amazingly prolific authors (don't their fingertips get sore?) lets us have an unsettling look through "Her Father's Eyes"; and new writer **Tavis Allison**, making a brilliant *Asimov's* debut, smuggles us along for an unforgettable night "In Father Christmas's Court"—a story that really doesn't have all that much to do with the Holiday Season, in spite of the title, but which *is* inventive, quirky, elegant, and scary.

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column examines some "Prodigies"; and **Paul Di Filippo** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our December Special Holiday Issue on sale at your newsstand on October 15, 2002, or subscribe today (you can now also subscribe online, or order *Asimov's* in downloadable electronic formats, at our *Asimov's* website, *www.asimovs.com*) and be sure to miss none of the great stuff we've got coming up for you this year! And remember, gift subscriptions to *Asimov's* makes **great** Christmas presents! Get them for your spouse, your Main Squeeze (the same person, we hope!), your parents, your siblings, your friends, your co-workers . . . hell, why not splurge and get gift subscriptions for **everybody**! That'll simplify your holiday shopping . . .

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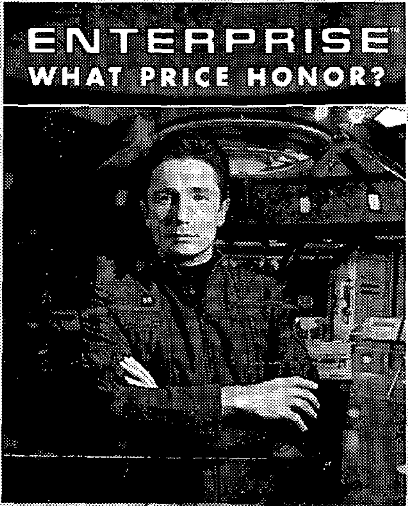
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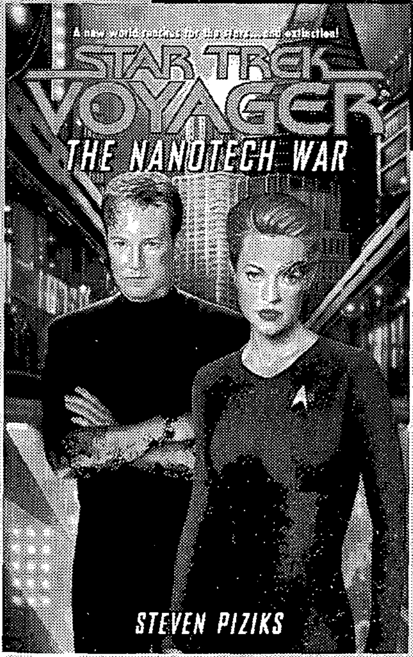
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